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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

AUGUST

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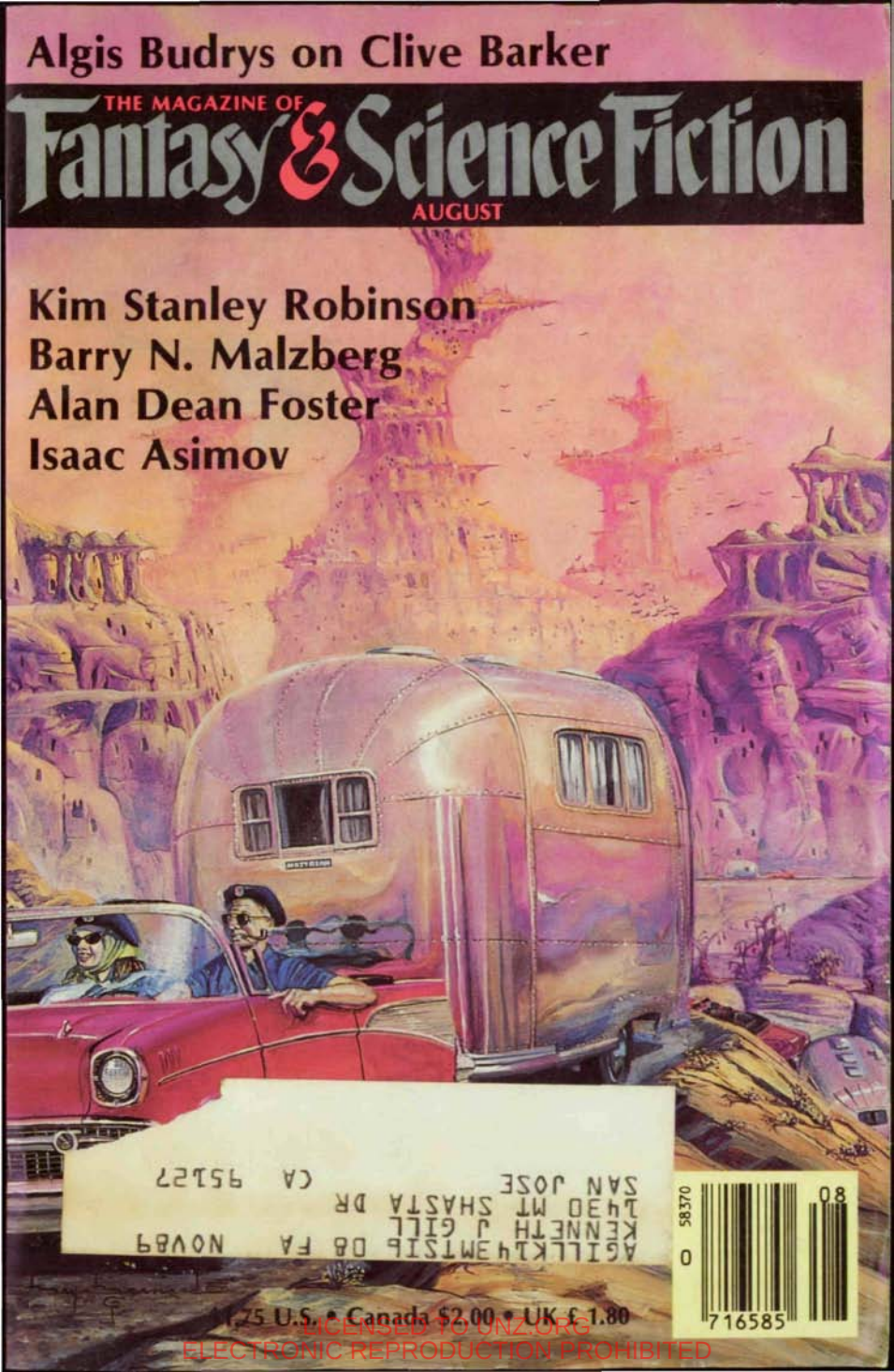

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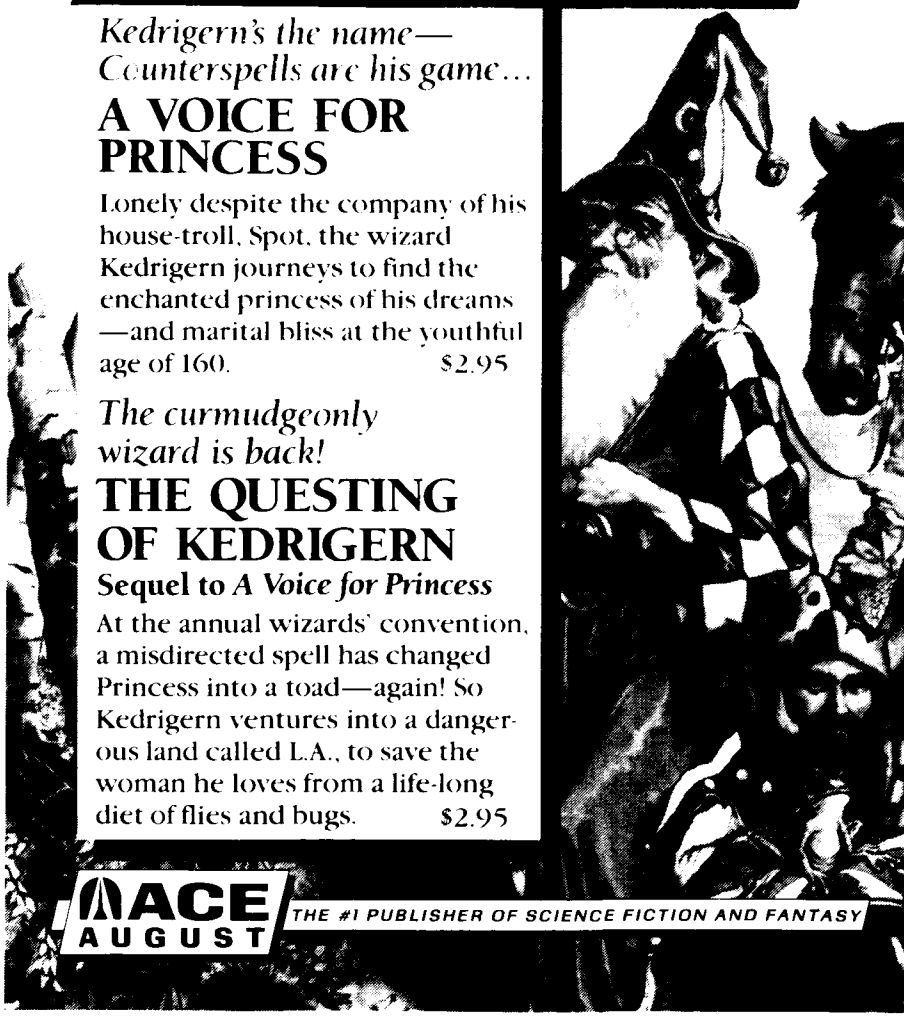

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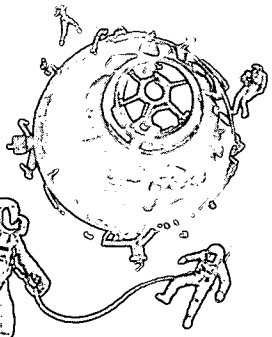

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Hidden deep in the canyons of the west and in the lore of the Native Americans is a mysticism that escapes explanation, and "The Return From Rainbow Bridge" tells of one boy's encounter with this mysticism. Kim Stanley Robinson ("A Transect," May 1986) currently resides in Zurich, Switzerland where he is busy finishing a novel, THE GOLD COAST.

The Return from Rainbow Bridge

BY
KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

When I was fifteen years old I visited the Navaho reservation north of Flagstaff, Arizona, to help the Indians celebrate the Fourth of July. Even before I arrived I thought that was kind of a strange thing to do. But something much stranger than that happened to me out there, before I left; something so strange that I have never been able to forget even the slightest detail of it, from that day to this.

On arrival late one Sunday afternoon I got out of my cousin Luke's blue VW, followed by my younger brother David. My great-aunt Miriam, a tall gray-haired woman in a cotton print dress, greeted us with a sweet girlish smile, holding our hands in hers. I walked around the car to stretch my legs and survey the grounds.

As it happened our arrival coincided with the onset of a summer storm. Overhead clouds like great dark lobes of marble filled the western sky. The setting sun leaked under the edge of this front, and glazed everything with a harsh orange glare. We stood on a broad, high, bare tableland; the horizon was an immense distance away. The blacktop road merged with the dark land to east and west, one shadow ribbon among many.

Small at the center of all this space, Inscription House Mission stood before us: a church, a house, and some rough outbuildings, all whitewashed, all glowing now in the fan of stormlight, the walls' whites tinged the color of the earth, and striped with solid black shadows, but intensely bright in the surrounding gloom, like lamps at dusk. Before these sun-colored walls, my cousin's car, a brilliant

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metallic blue even in ordinary light, gleamed like the shell of a glittering scarab, a visitor from another world.

We carried our bags into my great-aunt's house just as muddy dark splotches began starring the dusty earth around us. As we entered the house I looked back, and under the gray sheets of squall I saw a figure standing on a bare rise to the north, near the horizon. Silhouetted, solitary, somehow more heraldic than real, it raised both arms as if to encourage the coming downpour. My first Indian, I thought, and wondered if I had seen a sort of rain dance. I closed the door.

"That guy out there'll get wet," I said wisely.

"Who's that?" Luke asked, surprised.

"That Indian, out there under the storm."

He shook his head. "No one out there, far as I saw."

I opened the door again and looked out. There was nothing under the squall, no one out there on that whole broad plateau. And nowhere to hide. "What . . . ?" A gust of wind pushed at the door, as if something were trying to get in; I shivered.

That was the start of it.

While the rain drummed on the shingles of Aunt Miriam's house, the four of us talked; I didn't mention again the figure I had seen. Aunt Miriam served us powdered milk. It was the first time I had drunk it, and I didn't like the taste. "It tastes funny," I said.

Aunt Miriam smiled. "It's all we've got here."

"You get used to it," Luke said with a laugh.

The rain stopped after about half an hour, and as it was Sunday we walked over to the church to join the evening service. Yellow light from the church windows streaked the puddles in the yard, under a low black sky. The church's interior was one medium-sized room, filled with Navaho sitting in folding chairs. There were about forty of them in rows facing a narrow lectern and a piano at the front of the room. I was surprised to see so many people; I hadn't thought very many Indians would be Christian. David and I sat in chairs set against the side wall, near the front.

An older Navaho man spoke to them in Navaho from the lectern; while he did, I looked through a Bible and hymnal that had been on my chair. I saw that the Navaho language had an amazing frequency of vowels; there were words like *aanapalaooaa, liineaupoonaa, kreeatioo*. . . . It reminded me of an infant's babbling.

When the old man was done they sang hymns, Aunt Miriam accompanying them on the piano. They used the old tunes of Luther, Wesley, and Watt, but had translated the lyrics, and with all those vowels, and a wild warble in

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the women's voices, the familiar hymns — "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "Onward, Christian Soldiers" — were transformed, made utterly strange, unlike any music I had ever heard. Their beauty took me by surprise, and my cheeks flushed as I listened. Up at the front Aunt Miriam sang along, an expression of pure bliss on her upraised face. She had played the flute in the Chicago Symphony, I recalled; but that could never have made her look as she did now.

While they sang these weird hymns I stared at their faces. I was a bookish youth, and I had lived all my life in a southern California suburb, a white middle-class town that couldn't have been more homogeneous if it had been legislated that way. The truth was, in my entire life I had never seen faces like these before me: dark-skinned, sun-wrinkled, hawk-nosed, heavy-lidded, life-battered faces, each the map of a world, each framed and made beautiful by sleek straight black hair, and jewelry of silver and turquoise . . . extraordinary faces: visions out of my booklore, but real. Suddenly I experienced a convulsive blush, as with the music but stronger — because I realized, right then and there, that it went beyond mere stories in books: the world was real. *The world was real.* Man, I thought, not understanding what I felt — these are really Indians!

• • •

The next morning I went outside early to walk around a bit.

The great plateau of the Navaho reservation stands over six thousand feet above sea level; I suppose that is part of the reason everything looked different to me that morning. The sky was a dark, pure blue, and in this blue the feathering of a cirrus cloud was a startling white. The cool air was hard and clear, like a glass that sharpened vision. The rainstorm had washed the land, and the earth was dark red, or the color of wet sand. Chaparral and an occasional pine tree were scattered across the land. The chaparral was a shifting silvery color, like olive leaves, a shade that fit the earth tones; but the pines appeared to burst with green, as if more color had been pumped into them than they could actually hold: every pine needle poked the air, distinct in itself, dark with greenness flowing outward. I walked over to one of these pines — a juniper, I thought — feeling that I was swimming in color: red earth, green trees, blacktop road, white clouds, cobalt sky. . . .

I had been collecting the small, tight green cones of my tree for several minutes — just for something to do — when I looked up and saw that an Indian was watching me from no more than ten feet away. I jumped back, frightened; I hadn't heard him approach.

He was about my height, and somewhere in his forties or fifties I

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guessed; it was hard to tell. He wore old blue jeans, a plaid cotton shirt, and a cowboy hat. His face was like those of the people in church the night before (though I hadn't seen him there): broad, impassive, masklike . . . . "Hello!" I said nervously, afraid that I was stealing his pinecones or something.

"Hello." And he stared at me, calmly. Finally, after a long pause: "Do you like pinecones?"

"Well . . . sure! I mean they're . . . interesting!"

He looked at me. Later I became painfully familiar with that look . . . .

My nervousness increased. Finally, to break the silence, I said, "Do you live around here?"

"North some." He gestured briefly at the road. After that, silence again. He didn't seem to mind, but I was getting more uncomfortable by the second.

Perhaps he saw this. He cocked his head, watching me. "Do you play basketball?"

"Yeah!" I said, surprised. I told him about my ninth grade team.

He nodded without expression. "Come on."

I followed him back toward the mission, confused and uncertain. Then we rounded one of the rough outbuildings, and I saw that the far end of the yard was a big basketball court. A group of Navaho men and boys were crowded under one basket, milling around in a tussle for the ball.

The man stopped beside me. "It's twenty-one. You can play if you want."

So he and I joined the game. Everyone struggled for rebounds, and when you got one the whole group was your opponent; if you managed to score anyway, you went to the free throw line and shot till you missed. Points were scored as in regular basketball, and the first person to reach twenty-one won.

It was a wild game, a free-for-all, really, and I dashed around the outskirts of it somewhat at a loss. The court's surface was wet dirt sprinkled with loose gravel; not the most level of surfaces. A skinny tree trunk held up a backboard that was not quite square to the court, and the basket itself seemed unusually high, say eleven feet; perhaps it looked that way only because the backboard was so small. All in all, it was not what I was used to, and when a rebound came my way, I lost it dribbling. Frustrated, I got into the crowd and was elbowed and pushed with the rest of the boys as we scrambled around the men for loose balls. Impossible to hold on with six or seven hands slapping the ball; discouraged, I moved back outside, and was mostly watching when my new acquaintance took a rebound and drove into the crowd. When he was blocked off he fired a pass back over one shoulder, right at me. I got

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my hands up just in time to catch it, had an open moment, shot; incredibly, the ball caromed off the backboard and through the net.

At the free throw line looking up, I knew that I would miss. Even back home I couldn't make free throws, and here the basket looked twice as far away. I only hoped I would avoid an air ball.

No such luck. The ball missed everything by two feet. Involuntarily I cried out: "Aaaa!" The men and boys laughed, but in a friendly way; I had amused them by expressing aloud what everyone felt when they missed. I laughed too, and felt more at ease. In the third game I had six points when the winner hit twenty-one. Then some men arrived and there were enough to start a real game; the boys were kicked off the court. My Indian walked over to his team without even a glance in my direction, as if he had forgotten my existence.

I sat and watched the game, and Luke joined me. "They like basketball," I said.

He cracked up. "That's right. In fact they love basketball. Basketball and pickup trucks — those are the white man's things that the Navaho have really taken to." He laughed again. "These men — they've all got kids enough that the kids can take care of the sheep during the day. Dad can come down here and play ball with his friends, for an hour or two, anyway. They play almost every day."

I pointed out my acquaintance and asked who he was.

"That's Paul. Why do you ask?"

"He brought me over here and got me in the twenty-one game."

Luke smiled. "He's a good man. He's the one I'm trying to get to hike with us to Rainbow Bridge, after the Fourth. A good man." He frowned and tossed a few pieces of gravel back onto the court. "Paul's got a son about your age. But he moved to Flagstaff."

"That's good, isn't it?" Get out there in the modern world. . . .

Luke shook his head. "Alcohol's illegal on the reservation, see. It's just too much of a problem for them. So people who are . . . who want alcohol, they generally move down to Flagstaff. And then they're in trouble, because they can get it so easily."

"But he's only my age, you said!"

"That's right."

I didn't understand. He wasn't even old enough to *buy* alcohol. . . .

"Come on," Luke said, standing. "Let's go find your brother and go for a ride. I've got to go to the trading post."

Luke was one of those people whose internal dynamo is pitched several thousand r.p.m. higher than anyone else's. This was his vacation, he was just visiting Aunt Miriam (his great-aunt, too, from a different direction), but every day he had a long

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list of things to do. and he hustled around doing them until everyone with him dropped from exhaustion. Loading pickups with supplies, giving people rides up dirt tracks into the backcountry, building houses or fences, hunting for lost sheep: it was all great fun to him. I would have thought that Luke would be resented for all this help, but it wasn't so. In fact he had a real knack for pleasing the Navaho, for drawing them out. That afternoon, for instance, three times we passed solitary Navaho men walking down the road toward the trading post, some six miles away. Each time Luke stopped by them, even though after the first got in, the VW was full. "Want a ride? Where you going?" And they all got in, so that after the third one, David and I were crushed into a corner of the back seat. The men were forbidding in their silence, and apparently Luke didn't even know any of them; it made me nervous. But Luke laughed at the crowding, and started asking them questions — Where do you live? How many sheep have you got? How many kids? Do you go to that VISTA place? Aren't those folks strange? (They grinned.) Did you get caught out in that storm, yesterday? — and by the time we got to the trading post, the Navaho were talking away, both to Luke and among themselves, but always in English so we would be included, and they all took up his offer to load the VW and drive back to their homes (how are *we* going to fit in? I wanted to say), and while we were stuffing the Beetle with heavy boxes something Luke said struck them funny — I'm not sure what — and their stoic faces tilted up at the sky and broke into a million laugh lines as they cackled away. Luke just grinned, having a great time as usual. I envied him that ease, that skill.

That night at Aunt Miriam's we had mutton and bread. I had noticed the Navaho ate the same thing, every meal: bread and coffee for breakfast; mutton, bread, and coffee for lunch; and mutton, bread, and coffee for dinner. "Boy," I said, "these Navaho must sure like mutton, bread, and coffee!"

From the strain in my aunt's beautiful smile I knew I had said something stupid, but I didn't know what. Over the next few bites I worked it out. "They don't have anything else?"

My aunt shook her head, the smile gone.

"They have some canned stuff," Luke said. "But mutton, bread, and coffee, those are the staples."

I continued eating, and imagined having the meal before me, every day; it tasted different somehow.

The Fourth of July came. In the cool morning Paul came by in his pickup. Luke introduced him to David and me; he nodded, smiling a little smile at me. We drove out to a gravel pit in a dry streambed, took giant

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shovels and filled the bed of the truck with gravel. Then we drove back to the mission and shoveled the gravel onto the basketball court.

A fresh coat for the big day. As I spread gravel evenly over the long court I puzzled over the idea of Indians celebrating the Fourth of July. Shouldn't they hate this day? Shouldn't they be lighting bonfires and burning flags, or maybe the stray white man or two?

Apparently they didn't feel that way about it. Family after family drove up in pickup trucks. The women set big hampers of food on the picnic tables flanking the yard. They roasted sides of sheep over fires set in brick pits; fragrant white plumes of smoke rose into the sunny blue sky. The Navaho chatted cheerfully with the large group of white missionaries there for the day. The food was set out beside paper plates, and we filed past and loaded up: mutton, bread, and coffee — and also chili, watermelon, and Cokes. A real celebration. There must have been a hundred people there, maybe two hundred. I wandered around eating and watching, enjoying myself.

Only when the missionaries imposed a sequence of games on the group did the Navaho show the slightest sign that all was not perfect on that day. As these games began they withdrew into themselves, and went along with it all impassively. A missionary friend of my aunt's called me over to him. "Come here, we need you for this one!" I was into it before I understood what the game was; when I did, I groaned. The game was this: one of the missionaries stood with his back to a group of us, and threw wrapped pieces of candy over his head in our direction, and then we scrambled to pick up as many pieces as we could.

I couldn't believe it. No wonder all the kids around me were between five and ten years old; no wonder all the Navaho boys my age had refused to join, and were now standing in the circle of observers, watching me. So *undignified*. . . . Then the man threw the candy, and I gritted my teeth and went after some; damned if I could get my hands on a single piece. Those little kids were *serious* about this game, and they were fast as squirrels, and the bits of candy all disappeared almost before they hit the ground. Near the end of the ordeal I straightened up, after managing to wrestle a piece of toffee out of the clenched fist of a six-year-old, and saw the stares of all the boys my age. I felt myself flush scarlet with humiliation. And there was Paul, too, on the edge of the group, watching without expression. He said something in Navaho and the crowd dispersed; the kids left to tally their prizes; there was no one left for the missionary to inflict the game on. Paul walked off, and I stared after him gratefully, wondering what he could have said.

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Immediately I was called by the missionaries into a volleyball game with the boys my own age. Aha, I thought; I'll get back some lost face here. I had played quite a bit of volleyball at home, and I jumped about making hits as often as I could. Once I got an opportunity to spike the ball over the low net, and showing off a bit I leapt up and hit it hard. It bounced off across the yard, a clean point for our side. Then I saw the way all the other boys were looking at me, faces impassive but perfectly contemptuous, and I understood in a flash that they played the game differently here; it was like that beach paddle game, where you try to keep the ball in play for as long as possible. Humiliated again, I got my brother to take my place, and left the game. And I saw that once more Paul had been watching, from some distance away, standing there with his arms folded across his chest. I gritted my teeth unhappily.

Then it was time for the basketball game, and all the Navaho men perked up. Here was a real game, a proper way to celebrate the holiday.

They started the game before two in the afternoon, and it didn't end till after five, and the entire game was played in the most manic fast-break style I had ever seen. After a shot or rebound was made, everyone broke for the other basket, gravel spraying, the ball passed as if shot from cannons: a pass or two, a quick shot gunned, a tussle for the rebound, and off they flew the other way. Back and forth without a letup, all afternoon long. I sat on the end of one bench, openmouthed at the pace of this wonderful game, and hid from the missionaries. I tried to forget the humiliations they had just caused me, but they kept coming back to mind.

Then about an hour into the game Paul jogged by and said, "Want to play?"

I jumped up and took the place of one of Paul's teammates. I was the only white man out there, and I felt keenly the eyes of the game's audience. My team seemed most comfortable ignoring me, but Paul passed me the ball once or twice, and I managed to dribble and pass it off without mishap. Once I took it and drove for the basket, then passed it out to Paul, just as he had to me in the game of twenty-one: he caught it without a hitch and pumped it through for two.

Like the rest of the men, Paul was an incorrigible gunner. He would take passes on a little rise near half-court, and fire two-handed shots straight for the sky. The ball flew two or three times as high as the basket, it seemed, then swooped down and practically ripped the net off the hoop. No fooling with the backboard for Paul. If he missed and the ball hit the rim, it made an iron crash like the hoop was breaking off, and bounced so far out or up that the rebounders were confused. But I would say he hit about 60 percent of these bombs, and many of

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the other men were almost as accurate. It made for a high-scoring game; although, to tell the truth, I don't think they were keeping score.

I played for about twenty minutes, and left the game so beat I could hardly walk. After some rest and a couple of Cokes I recovered, and I chatted with Luke and David and Aunt Miriam while we watched the rest of the game. "These guys could beat any team in the NBA!" I said, excited. Luke grinned and added, "If it weren't for the fact that the tallest one out there is five eleven." I laughed; I was pleased; the earlier embarrassments were forgotten. The Fourth of July was turning out all right after all.

Only late that night, in bed, did it occur to me whose doing that had been.

A day or two later, Luke and I drove north to Paul's home, to fix the date of our hike to Rainbow Bridge, "the biggest natural arch in the world!" — also to make sure Paul would come. Luke was a little vague about it: "Well, Paul's got a lot of responsibilities; we have to see if he's still free. . . ." Up a bumpy dirt track, rocky and pink in the surrounding tans, into the wash of a flat-bottomed canyon, past tall delicate whitebarked trees, their broad green leaves translucent in the sunlight. . . .

Tucked up against the canyon wall were fences, Paul's pickup, a low oval hut. We stopped in the yard and got out. Red chickens scattered before us. There were five-gallon plastic jugs lined against one wall of the hut, which seemed *woven,* sort of: wood and wicker and perhaps *mud,* in a complex pattern. The place was quite clearly *handmade.*

Luke knocked on the wooden door and was called in. I stood in the doorway and stared into the gloom, uncertain about following. Paul was getting up from an old stuffed armchair; some others sat around a table near a fat black stove. Paul greeted us politely and shook both our hands — because we were visiting his home, I guessed. Luke said something, and they all laughed. The two men talked, and the eyes around the stove watched me. The interior walls were hung with boldly patterned rugs, earth tones cut by bright white zigzags. There were some sort of masks in the corner, it looked like. Paul and Luke were busy talking, and I backed out the door, confused and uncomfortable under the gaze of Paul's family.

Penned against the little house by the fences were sheep — or goats, actually. Goats. They looked dirty, and had an awful smell. The whole place was so shabby, so small. . . . Poverty, I thought: this is what poverty looks like. Maybe I would have gone to Flagstaff, too. . . .

Luke ducked out. "We're all set," he said. "He wants to take off tomorrow. Some folks on the Hopi reserva-

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tion need his help in a few days, so the sooner the better for the trip."

On the drive back I had a hard time collecting myself. Luke noticed; he said, "That's a *hogan* they live in, the traditional Navaho home. You're lucky to have seen one."

I couldn't help myself. "But it was so small! And . . . dirty!"

"Not dirty. They're actually quite clean. Small, true. But it's easier to heat them that way."

"But this is the desert!" We were sweating even with the windows down.

"Yes, but in the winter it snows. Blizzards like you can't believe. Hot in the summer and cold in the winter — that's the high desert for you. It's hard to make housing that will keep you comfortable in both extremes, especially without electricity. A lot of Paul's friends are building new houses, regular framing and walls of stuccoed plasterboard . . . They look like the houses down in Flagstaff; you probably would think they were nicer, but they freeze in the winter and bake in the summer and fall apart in ten years. The hogans are actually better homes."

This was interesting, and I found it comforting to an extent; but the sight of the hogan, home of the man I had thought powerful and influential — so small, dark, *primitive* — had shocked me, and that shock was more powerful than Luke's calm reasoning.

The next morning Luke woke us in the dark, and while the sky went from indigo to the rich velvet blue of predawn, we drove north. David slept on the back seat, and I watched the headlight beams light the asphalt road against the dusty blond shadows of the land. Paul followed us in his truck. We drove uphill, and the low gnarled pine trees, scattered here and there like black boulders, proliferated until we drove through a kind of rocky forest.

We parked in a gravel lot next to the Navaho Mountain Trading Post, a single wooden building, closed. The lot was empty except for us. Luke was pleased. "We'll have the whole trail to ourselves, I bet." In the morning chill we ate apples, and their cidery smell mixed with the piney odor of the trees.

Paul and Luke had packs, and David and I carried our cotton sleeping bags in rolls strapped to our shoulders. We started walking on the trail, a level white swath through the thick network of trees.

The trees shifted from black to green. The sun rose to our right, and shadows jumped down the slope to the west. Above us to the east rugged sandstone ramparts alternated with steep pine-filled ravines; Navaho Mountain, Luke told us, was above and beyond the cliffs we could see. The trees were scattered everywhere now, for as far as we could see. "Piñon pines," Luke said. "Biggest stand of piñon pines in the whole world."

The broad trail was marked every

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mile by a metal pole, cemented in the dirt and painted bright red. Milestones, I thought. Luke laughed at them. It was fifteen miles to Rainbow Bridge.

The trail turned left, down to the west. The land began to fall away so rapidly that the trail switchbacked; here the tableland fell down into the canyons surrounding the Colorado River. We could see a long way to the west, over tawny ridges, knobs, shadowed canyon walls. We passed milepole number five.

The trail brought us around the head of a deep canyon that snaked out to the west. "Look down there!" Luke said, pointing. "There's the trail in the canyon bottom; see it?"

There it was, far below, a white line across tan rocks. Between us and it was an immense slope like the inside of a bowl, all jumbled by stratification and erosion. "How will we get down there?" David asked.

I had been wondering that myself; I couldn't see the trail anywhere on the canyon walls. Luke started walking again, to the right rather than down. "The north side is less steep, the trail goes down there." We traversed most of a mile around the head of the canyon, then left the trees and descended the wall by following hundreds of wide switchbacks in the trail. It was fun swinging around each hairpin turn, changing directions and views as we dropped deeper and deeper into the rocky canyon world . . . .

More than an hour later we reached the canyon floor. The perspective was different down there; the broad prospect we had enjoyed up on the forested mountainside plateau was gone, and now our view was confined to the walls of the canyon we were in. Above, white-blue sky. The canyon was a deep, flat-bottomed river gorge, and the trail followed the shallow pebbly stream at the bottom. Green reeds, silvery shrubs, and small cottonwoods banked this meager stream. "Cliff Canyon," Luke told us. "We'll stay in this one for a long time."

We followed the stream in its descent, milepole after milepole. I sang "Onward, Christian Soldiers" to myself as a marching song, and discovered that if I took one step for every quarter note, the hymn took me exactly one hundred steps. This seemed to me clever planning on the part of the composer. I counted steps from one red pole to the next: 1,962 steps for a mile. Four more steps and I would have hit the year. I tried to step just a little bit smaller.

We stopped and had lunch at the pool where Cliff Canyon met Redbud Pass gorge. The surface of the pool had a perfect blue sheen to it, while under it polished pebbles gleamed pink and chocolate; and the two colors, satin blue and mottled pebblestone, coexisted without mixing, both completely filling the same surface. I stared at the impossible sight, entranced.

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We made an abrupt right turn and hiked up Redbud Pass gorge, and it was unexpectedly tiring to go uphill at even that slight angle. But we came to a section of the canyon that was so narrow that we had to twist to get through some parts; for almost a mile we could touch both walls at once, and they rose straight up on each side for over four hundred feet, Luke said. The sky was no more than a blue ribbon atop these endless rock walls. It was such an extraordinary thing that we were all excited. Luke sang, "Fat man's misereee!" and David and I laughed helplessly as we slipped along. We forgot we were tired, and hiked heads-up until our necks hurt. Paul, bringing up the rear, had a big smile on his face: white teeth, brown skin in a million laugh lines: hawk face, enjoying the canyon once again, enjoying our first-time amazement.

The gorge of the pass opened up into Redbud Creek Canyon; we took a left turn and started down again. This canyon's stream made many big twists and turns, and the canyon walls S'ed with it, exposing hundreds of fluted sandstone columns, balancing boulders, smooth overhung curves, knobs like elephant heads.

I was getting a little too tired to really enjoy them, however, and poor David was beginning to drag indeed, when the canyon took a big oxbow bend to the left, and there in the outside wall of this bend was a bulge, a narrow, horseshoe-shaped extension of the canyon into the cliffside. The cliff surrounding this bulge was a tall, curved, overhanging wall of rust-colored sandstone; the floor of it was flat, and just higher than the canyon floor proper. Underneath the great curving overhang was a stand of big old trees, a pool fed by a cold spring, several old picnic tables, a brick fireplace with a blackened grill on top, a stack of firewood, and scattered about, six old bedsteads, stripped to metal.

"Here's camp!" Luke said, seeing our confused looks.

"But what about Rainbow Bridge?" I asked.

"It's just a little way down the canyon. Let's leave our stuff here and go have a look."

Rainbow Bridge was less than a quarter mile away; we could see it for most of the walk there. A broad arch of sandstone, it began not up atop the canyon walls as I had expected, but down at their bases, to left and right as we approached. The canyon opened up quite a bit here, so the bridge was very wide, and it rose perhaps sixty feet over us. It was flat-sided, rounded on top and bottom, streaked with brown watermarks, and sure enough, it had a broad rainbow shape to it.

Though it was no later than five or six, it was gloomy down in the canyon, the sun long gone and shining only on the very tops of the walls. The

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light tans and yellows of the sandstone around us were now brown, black, blood-red. I stared up at the arch. Compared to the Golden Gate Bridge, for instance, it wasn't very big. And all day I had been walking under the most fantastic contortions of sandstone that wind and water could carve. . . . Compared to that mad sculpture, the bridge was pretty basic stuff. But it *was* unusual; and pretty big; and when you considered that it had just *happened* out here, accidental-like . . . and the way it loomed in the too-bright strip of evening sky, dark as stone — a stone rainbow, the reverse of an ordinary rainbow: slab-sided, massive, permanent. . . .

Luke walked around it in a fever of energy, snapping pictures with his little camera. "I wish the light were better," he said. "We won't get much on film." Paul was sitting on a rock, watching him with his eyelids creased, amused. "This will probably be the last chance I get to photograph it in its natural state."

"What's that?" I said.

"The lake. You remember? This canyon leads down to the Colorado River, about three or four miles away. But it's Lake Powell now, you know, because of Hoover Dam. And the lake is still rising. This canyon is flooding, and they say you'll be able to boat right under the bridge in a couple of years."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. This'll be water, right here where we stand. It might even flood the whole bridge, although they say it won't." Luke was matter-of-fact about it; that was just the way it was, nothing to get upset over, not when there was nothing to be done.

I glanced over at Paul. No expression on his face, none at all. The Navaho mask. . . . He was looking up at the streaked sides of the arch. I walked under it again, on solid ground, and stared up at it. Massive rust band against the sky. . . . It looked different somehow.

That evening, as night fell and the stars appeared in the arc of the sky standing over the cliffs, we started a fire in the brick fireplace and cooked hot dogs for dinner. The flames cast a warm, flickering yellow on the overhanging back wall. This smooth sweeping curve echoed our voices, and the crackling wood, and the low gurgle of the water leaving the spring's pool; it amplified the *whoo* of the wind flowing downcanyon.

We devoured the hot dogs, ate three or four apiece. Afterward I walked around the camp a little. The big old trees had crumpled gray-green bark, gnarled branches, leaves as smooth and prickly-edged as holly leaves. The bare metal bedsteads gave the place the look of a ruin: giant cathedral, roof fallen in, trees growing up out of the floor, altar a fireplace, beds dragged in. . . . The wind

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hooted and the sharp-edged leaves clattered, and feeling spooked I returned to the others.

After we had laid out our sleeping bags and gotten into them, I still felt . . . strange. I had chosen to sleep on one of the picnic tables, and was under one of the trees. Between the black leaves the stars appeared and disappeared, pricking at my sight, creating a sense of constant movement that was not necessarily in the leaves. There were lots of little noises, echoing off the overhang. I had seldom if ever slept outdoors before, and it felt . . . exposed, somehow. Someone could just sneak right up on you! They could sneak up and murder all of us down here, and no one would know! Well, that was silly. But stuck so deep in this deep canyon, the vault of the sky so far above the tree-filled black horseshoe bend, the wind whistling over the rock, the world seemed a vast place: vast, dark, windy. . . . I lay there for a long time before falling asleep.

I woke in the middle of the night, having to pee. Something in me resisted getting up: fear of the open darkness, clutching at me. But I had to go, and I slid out of my sleeping bag and stepped off the picnic bench, then walked down toward the bridge, out of the camp.

Once out from under the trees a great map of stars sheltered me. In their brilliance I recognized not a single constellation. It seemed the moon might be rising, or else the starlight was brighter here than I was used to; the canyon walls caught enough illumination to reveal some of their hieroglyphics of erosion. It was chill but not cold, and I walked down the trail to take a brief look at the bridge in this strange light.

A man stood directly beneath the bridge, both arms raised to the sky. Paul . . . I recognized the gesture as that made by the solitary figure I had seen greeting the storm on the evening we had arrived — the figure that had disappeared! — and I understood that that had been Paul out there. He was some sort of . . . I didn't know what.

He turned around, aware of being watched, and saw me. Reluctantly I walked down the trail and joined him.

"You're up late," I said.

"So are you."

We stood there. As my eyes adjusted further to the dark — as the moon, perhaps, rose farther in the blocked-off sky to the east — I could see his face better: crags of weathered flesh, shadowed fissures deeply scored; it looked like the sandstone around us. Water sounds, small but distinct, played beneath us; wind sounds, soft but large, soughed over us, as if the canyon were an immense flute that someone was breathing through. . . . By moving my head a

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little, I could make stars wink in and out of existence, there at the black edges of the arch.

"How can they flood this place?" I said quietly.

Paul shrugged. "Build a dam. . . ."

"Oh, I know. I know. But . . . can't you stop it?"

He shook his head.

"I wish you could. . . ."

"It doesn't matter." I was about to protest that it did, when he raised a hand and held it out between us. A narrow silver ring blinked starlight, there on his litte finger. "The bridge is like the ring. Your people come to see it, on foot like you have, and soon by boat. Many people. But while the ring takes attention like that, the rest of the hand — the rest of the body — it's all left alone."

"You mean the reservation."

"All the land here, all the canyons. This ring is precious, but it isn't the body. There are hundreds of canyons out here — canyons and mesas, mountains, rivers without an end to them. Arches, yes. To have all the attention on this bridge, all the visitors . . . it's not such a bad thing."

"I see. I understand."

"Places only we know about are let be . . . cliff dwellings."

"Like the Inscription House ruin?" I said.

"Yes, like that. Only hidden. Never found, you see. Lost forever, perhaps. Let be forever."

Then we were silent, listening to the great flute channel the wind. I thought of Rainbow Bridge as a giant stone ring, buried just a bit more than halfway into the earth. The light in the canyon grew ever stronger, though the sky to the east remained a pure black, the stars there wavering intensely in the shiver of the atmosphere.

"Do you think your son will ever come back?" I said.

He glanced at me, surprised. The wet surface of his eyes reflected tiny pinpoint stars. ". . . Yes," he said finally. "But when he does" — tapping his head with a finger — "a part of him will be dead."

My head felt as if he had tapped me, just over the ear. Quickened—

I woke from the dream with a start. It was dark, stars blinked in the black mesh of branches over me. The stiff, sharp-edged leaves clicked against each other. The dream hesitated on the leaf-edge of oblivion — then slipped back into my memory, intact. I thought about it.

I did have to pee. I got out of the sleeping bag, stepped off the picnic table, walked around the tree.

When I was done I rounded the tree and almost ran into him. "Ah!" I leaped back, tripped, almost fell.

"Hey," Paul said softly, helping me get to my feet. "It's just me." He let go of me, looked at me. In the dark I couldn't read his expression; I could barely see it. "Still me." He

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walked past me, toward his bedroll.

When I got back in my sleeping bag, my heart was still thumping, as loud in my ears as snapped fingers. *Still me* . . . . The side of my head tingled. I looked up at the patternless smeary white stars, sure it would take me hours to fall asleep again; but I don't recall staying awake for even so much as a minute.

The next morning we ate a breakfast of crackers and oranges, rolled our bags and packed our gear, poured water on the ashes of the fire, and took off. It was a warm morning, the cliff-rimmed patch of sky a clear pale blue. Paul didn't mention our encounter of the previous night; in fact, he said hardly a word during breakfast, and led the way up the canyon without looking back. Luke, David and I followed.

It didn't take long to discover that hiking back up out of the canyons was harder than descending into them. Yesterday I hadn't even noticed how continuous the descent was; now every step up spoke to me. And at some 1,962 steps per mile . . . for fifteen miles . . . I couldn't finish the multiplication in my head, but I knew it was a lot of walking.

We had a short respite going down the Redbud Pass gorge, and the narrow section was still wonderful; but once in Cliff Canyon it was uphill for good. The sun burst over the south wall of the canyon, and the day got hot. Frequently we stopped to drink. We stayed in the same order: Paul, me, David, Luke. I started to sing "Onward, Christian Soldiers," but looking at Paul's back before me I felt stupid doing it, and I stopped.

David was the first to give out; he sat down by a pool and rolled onto his back. I was kind of proud of him: he had walked until he dropped without a single word of complaint. A tough kid, my little brother.

We sat by the pool and considered it. David, nearly asleep where he lay, was clearly played out. Luke, unworried and cheerful, filled David's water cup at the pool. "Why don't you two go on ahead," he said to Paul and me. "You can take Paul's truck back to the mission, and that way Aunt Miriam won't worry about us. I'll come up with David either late tonight or tomorrow morning."

Paul and I nodded, and after a short rest the two of us started off.

After about an hour of hiking behind Paul, watching Cliff Canyon broaden and open up, I saw the canyon's head. Before us stood a curved slope just as steep as the walls to right and left. This was where the trail had that long sequence of switchbacks, ascending the left wall, reaching the tableland above, and then skirting the canyon's rim up there, to a patch of piñon on the top of the right wall. I could even see where the trail went, up among those tiny trees; it

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was so *far* above. I couldn't believe how far above it was; surely we hadn't come down from there!

Later I learned that the trailhead is three thousand feet higher than Rainbow Bridge; and a full fifteen hundred of those vertical feet are climbed right there, on the headwall of Cliff Canyon. At the time it looked even taller than that. And the worst part of it, as far as I was concerned, was that the trail took such a gigantic detour to the left! It effectively doubled the distance we had to go to reach that patch of piñon pine on top of the right wall. And all those dumb switchbacks, adding distance too . . . . I couldn't believe it.

I was tired, I wanted an easier way. "Listen," I said to Paul, "couldn't we just head straight up the right slope to where the trail goes through those trees? It isn't much steeper than the trail side, and we'd get it over with that much faster."

Paul shook his head. "The trail's the best way."

But I had convinced myself, and stubbornly I argued to convince him. "You can see the whole slope from here to there — just dirt — no brush to walk through, nothing to it! It's just like a stairway all the way up! And then we wouldn't have to go way off the wrong way!" On and on I went.

Paul watched me without expression. No argument with my points; no irritation that I would debate the best route with him; just an impassive gaze, staring at me. That look, becoming familiar: Did it hide a laugh?

Finally, after I had repeated my points many times, he looked away, off into the distance. "You go that way, then. I'll take the trail, and meet you up in those trees."

"All right," I said, happy to have my way. I thought it was an excellent plan. "I'll see you up there."

He turned and trudged up the dust-white trail.

It's hard now for me to believe that I could have been that stupid. To think a cross-country route would be easier than trail; to argue with a Navaho about the best way to get from one point to another, in Navaho country; to ignore Paul's judgment and go off on my own . . . incredible. But I was fifteen, and I was tired, and I wanted an easier way. I wished one into existence, and took off.

I started up the slope. The footing was good, and I made good progress. I imagined greeting Paul at the top when he finally appeared by way of the trail. I glanced over the other side of the canyon to see how far he had gotten, but the trail followed a crease that was probably the streambed when it rained enough, so he was out of sight. I could still see the trees at the top, however, and after a short rest I pressed on.

The canyon side I ascended was

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sandstone. No doubt it had been formed as successive layers of some primordial beach, eons ago; in any case it was horizontally stratified, and this meant I climbed something very like an ancient staircase, weathered now almost out of existence. Stone ledges protruded from the angled slope of grainy dirt, giving me a few inches of flat surface to step up on. On the dirt itself it was harder; the angle stretched my Achilles tendons, and there was a slight tendency to slip back that had to be resisted.

It was hot, and there was no wind. The sun blazed overhead so that a big quadrant of sky was too white to look at. I had to wipe sweat from my eyebrows to keep it from getting in my eyes and stinging. Once the dirt beneath my shoe gave way, and I went down to one knee, and got up with my sweaty hands all dirty.

Time passed. I began to zigzag a little to decrease the angle of the slope, and give my Achilles tendons a break. I was still low in the canyon. Looking up I could no longer see all the way to the top; steep points in the slope along the way intervened, and became my temporary skyline. Luckily, the configuration of the slope itself kept me on course. I was climbing a sort of rounded ridge, and if I deviated too far to left or right, the angle of the slope became quite a bit steeper. So I was following the edge of an indistinct buttress (though I didn't know that), and thus I had a clear route.

Onward and upward. I began taking a rest every hundred steps. I had already come to the conclusion that the trail would have been easier: you could step flat on the trail, and you didn't slide backward half the time, and you didn't have to figure out which way to go every step of the way. I felt foolish, as one always does at the halfway station between innocence and experience. Blake missed that category: *Songs of Foolishness.*

The terracing of sandstone ledges began to get more distinct, and larger in scale. Instead of stairs, they were waist- or chest-high, as if they were stairs for giants, with vertical sections to them that were steeper than I was used to. So each ledge had to be climbed, or else I had to zigzag a route up the various dry gullies that broke through these ledges. It was hard work. Looking up I could usually see only a hundred feet or so at a time, and the view never changed; it kept on like that no matter how long I went between rests. The day got hotter.

I had no hat. I had no water. I had no food. I had no map or compass (though they wouldn't have done me any good if I had them). In fact, I had nothing but a cotton sleeping bag hanging from my shoulders, and its straps were really cutting into my arms. I couldn't see my destination anymore, but, judging by the canyon below, and the great wall across from me, I still had a long, long way to go.

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And the way kept getting harder.

Slowly but surely, fear began to seep into me. What if I lost my way, and somehow missed the exact knot of piñon pines that marked where the trail was? It would be impossible just to find the trail, without that landmark. And then what if I couldn't go on without water, and couldn't find any? Or — I slipped hard and banged my knee on a ledge, which made me cry out with fear — what if I hurt myself so badly I couldn't walk? This slope was so immense, no one would ever find me on it.

I shoved these fears away and climbed on a bit faster, spurred by their presence, pushing in around the edges of conscious thought. But soon enough the surge of adrenaline they had caused was used up, by a hard scramble up a dry streambed. As I got more and more tired it became impossible to hold the fears out of my thoughts, and they came pouring back in. My head ached, in a tight band across my temples. My tongue was a thick, dry thing clogging my mouth; it tasted of dust, and I couldn't work up a bit of saliva. My breaths were like ragged sobs.

The sun had shifted far to the west, and the rocks threw shadows off to the left. The light had that ominous dark brilliance that sometimes comes late in the day after a cloudless noon, with the lengthening shadows and a mare's tail or two of cloud in the sky. Above me the slope appeared to steepen, into a genuine staircase shape of horizontal, vertical, horizontal, but on a giant's scale, the little cliffs of the verticals now ten feet tall.

The time came when panic overwhelmed me. Not in a single rush, but in a growing crescendo of fear, which pushed, and pushed, and finally became *panic*, that flood of fear-beyond-fear, fear pushed up onto another plane . . . how to describe it? All my senses were heightened, though their input seemed malignant. I could feel tiny puffs of breeze chilling my sweat-soaked back, could see every individual pebble and sand grain, for as far as the canyons extended. . . . I could feel my breathing, all my muscles, my blood washing about in me, pumping hard through the heart. I knew that I could die, astonishing knowledge for a fifteen-year-old. But I also knew tht I still lived, and could act. Panic-stricken, in a sort of exuberance of fear, I climbed again, ignoring the complaints of my muscles and the niceties of the best route, scrambling hard where I had to, moving resolutely upward, attacking the obstacles furiously. . . . I suppose I had never been quite as alive as in those moments, ever in my life.

In fact I suppose that all my subsequent interest in the extremities of physical endurance, in the exploration of the bleak and harsh parts of the globe — the poles, the high mountains, the deserts — was born in those moments, when I felt the reality of

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such extremity myself. Ever afterward I would know what it felt like to be pressed to the edge; I would remember the strange surge into that other world of panic spring . . . and the memory of it creates a certain (is it morbid?) fascination. . . .

Unfortunately, purest panic cannot last very long, and when it washed out of me, step by weary step, I pressed on in dull misery. As I forced myself up I wondered what Paul would think when I died and never showed up.

His face, hawklike under the gleaming black hair, popped into sight over a ledge above me. "Paul!" I cried. "Here!"

He saw me and grinned. "Glad to see you!"

"*You're* glad to see *me*! Wow—" I laughed tearfully. "I was hoping you'd look for me. I've been sort of lost down here. . . ."

"There's still a way to go. Here, come up this way, up this crack."

I followed his directions, almost giggling with relief. "Oh man," I said, remembering the past hour. "Oh man!" I reached the ledge he was on and stood next to him. We looked at each other. Maybe this time there was the slightest expression on his face: a raised pair of eyebrows. Well, boy?

I shrugged sheepishly and looked down. "How long did you wait for me?"

"An hour or so."

"It — it was harder than it looked."

"That's almost always true, around here. Get far enough away and you can't see the ledges like this at all — they just look like water streaks."

"That's right! Why from below it looked like a smooth walk all the way."

He didn't reply. We stood there. "I think I can go on now," I said.

He nodded. We started climbing the slope; I followed him, putting my feet in his footprints, which saved me some sliding. Up and up, step after step. He stopped often so we could rest.

I was lucky he had come down to look for me, because the slope of the wall, like the inside of a bowl, got steeper as we approached the top. The vertical sections were now sometimes twelve or fifteen feet tall, while the flat ledges narrowed to little sitting platforms. . . . Time after time Paul found breaks in these faces — footholds, dry streambeds, routes of one sort or another — so that, using hands to pull ourselves, we could make our way up.

"Man, how did you get *down* here?" I asked during one rest.

"Same way we're going up — that's how I know the way. It's a lot easier seeing the way down. Harder to actually do it, but if you're patient, it's not bad."

On and up. We came to one cliff about fifteen or eighteen feet high — trouble. The only way up that didn't

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force a long detour was a sequence of knobs and notches that had to be climbed like a ladder. Paul climbed it and showed me the holds. I took a deep breath and started up after him; his head poked over the top as he watched me.

I was almost to him when my right foot slipped out of its niche. The other foot went too, and I was falling when he grabbed me by the wrist. One hand, clamped on my wrist, holding me up; I couldn't get a purchase on the sandstone I was knocking against. My hand caught his wrist, so we were twice linked.

"Be still." I looked up; his neck muscles bulged out, his mouth was pursed. "I pull you up to here, you grab the ledge with your other hand. Then get a knee over. Ready?"

"Yeah," I gasped. I felt his hand crush my wrist as he prepared for the pull, and then I was scraped up the sandstone, and scrambling for a handhold on the ledge, pulling up, left knee up and over, like high jumping — and I was on the ledge, face in the gritty dirt. Paul was sprawled back on the ground, still holding on to my wrist. He sat up, smiling a small smile.

"You O.K.?"

I nodded breathlessly, looking at the white finger marks on my wrist. I didn't want to start crying, so I didn't say anything.

"We'll find a better way up any others like that. Come on."

I staggered up and followed him. True to his word, we were able to climb gullies to make it up every vertical slab. I was thankful; by this point I was past any extra effort. It was hard just to walk.

Then the slope tilted back and got easier. We snaked up a little gully that was like a miniature of the canyons below. And we came out of the top of it into trees — piñon pines, on flat, sandy ground. The top. And there, just by the first trees, threading its way among them, was the trail, a wide whitish trough.

"Oh good," I said.

Paul stopped in the trail and we rested. He saw the look on my face and said, "Cross-country can be hard."

I nodded mutely.

"The hard way can teach you a thing or two, though. Here. You lead. Set whatever pace you're comfortable with. We still have a way to go."

It was true, but I didn't care. We were on the trail. I walked along it zombielike. It was amazing how easy it was to walk on a trail; no decisions to make at all, no terrible stretch of foot and Achilles tendon . . . wonderful thing, trail. How long had I been off it? Four hours, five? It seemed much longer than that, but the sun still shone, there was a good deal of daylight left; it couldn't have been more than five hours. What a lot of living to fit into such a small span! What a lot of appreciation for trail, to have gained in only five hours!

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I was hiking along the trail through the pines, and half-thinking thoughts such as these, when I rounded a corner and saw Paul lying there ahead of me, sacked out asleep under a tree, his cowboy hat shading his face.

I jerked to a stop and spun around. No Paul following me on the trail. I had heard his steps behind me just a moment before.

I turned again, confused. The Paul under the tree heard me, tipped up his cowboy hat, saw me. He sat up, calm and slow. "You made it," he said.

I felt the skin on my back crawl. I began to tremble, and for a second light-headedness washed through me and almost made me sick. My vision returned with scores of crawling clear tubes in it. "How — how long have you been here?"

He shrugged. "An hour or so. You get lost?"

I shook my head. "You didn't. . . ." I couldn't finish.

He stood, put on his pack, came over and looked at me. He cocked his head curiously . . . something in his look, there . . . not complicity, but perhaps an acknowledgment that I had a right to be confused. . . .

"Here," he said. "Want me to take that sleeping bag?"

"You won't m— you won't mind?" Because my shoulders were aching fiercely under the straps.

He smiled a little — just exactly the smile he had had on his face after he pulled me up the cliff. My wrist tingled with the memory of that crushing grip, and when he touched my arm to slip the sleeping bag off I almost cried out. I sat down right on the spot, trembling all over, my skin rippling in great shivers of nervous shock, of fear. Rippling fields of goose bumps. . . . "But I. . . ." But I was too frightened of him to be able to ask him anything. I looked back the way I had come, thinking he might still appear; yet here he was before me, taking off his pack, tying my sleeping bag to the top of it. . . .

He got it secured and put the pack back on. He looked at me, concerned. "It's O.K."

I wiped the tears from my face. Nodded, looking down, ashamed. It was emphatically not O.K. But there was nothing for it but to stand, to follow him down the trail.

He stepped in front of me, caught my ashamed gaze, reached out and touched my arm with a single finger. "It's O.K. now." Something in his voice, his eyes — as if he knew everything that had happened. . . .

My shivering stopped, I nodded meekly. "O.K. Let's go."

But all the way back I thought of it. The trailhead was a long way across the tableland, and it was a miserable hike through the long shadows of the

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last part of the day, sky already darkening with the sun still up, lenticular cloud over Navaho Mountain glowing the color of the canyons, every little wave of it a perfectly drawn french curve. . . . Cruelly, the Park Service had set the red mileposts farther and farther apart the closer to the trailhead you came; I hadn't noticed on the way out. I tried counting steps one to the next and lost count in the first hundred.

Maybe he had gone down to get me, then as we hiked up the trail, had snuck ahead through the trees to lie down and give me a surprise. Only he couldn't have: the trail cut through a sort of notch there, with thick forest on each side. From the time I last saw Paul behind me until the first moment I saw Paul under the tree, only a couple of minutes had elapsed. There just wasn't time for such a maneuver. No . . . I began to shiver again. Each time I forced myself to truly confront the memory of what had happened, I was racked with electric shivers running up and down my back, then all over me; and the spasms shook my head violently, as if my spine were a branch and my head a fruit, orange or apple or pear, that someone was trying to bring down. . . .

In a garish desert sunset we reached the trading post, the parking lot. The trading post was open, and we went in. While Paul spoke in Navaho I went to the big cooler in the corner, one of those refrigerated metal trunks that stands waist-high. I flipped the top hatch open and pulled out a Nehi Grape drink, pulled off the flip top and drank it down in two long swallows. I can still remember perfectly the strange carbonated grape flavor of that drink. When I was done I got out another can and drank it too.

Paul drove us home through the dusk, his pickup's big headlight beams bouncing about in tandem as we hit potholes in the asphalt. I was too tired to think much, but once the sight of Paul lying there under that tree, hat over his face, flashed before me, and the goose bumps rippled over me again, like the wind shooting cat's-paws over the surface of a lake. My whole nervous system resonated with fear; I once again felt his hand clamped on my wrist, my knees scraping the sandstone, feet free in the air, searching for purchase. . . . I've never had a better demonstration of how completely our skins are linked to our minds. Then the fit passed, and I slumped in the seat again, sweating, watching the headlight beams lance the darkness.

Maybe I had gone crazy. Yeah, that was it: I had gone crazy and hallucinated Paul's presence with me on that canyon side. And I must have hallucinated that fall, too, because if I really had fallen it was certain no hallucination was going to catch me and pull me up. Sure. The whole thing,

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just a frightened sunstruck dream.

The only trouble was, I knew that it hadn't been. Oh, I know, you can say if you went crazy then you were crazy, and you couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't. But that isn't the way it works, not in the real world. I mean, that's the really sad thing about insane people: almost all of them know perfectly well that something is seriously wrong with them; that's what makes them so scared, so depressed. They know.

And I knew, I *knew*, that I had not hallucinated that slip and fall, or the hand on my wrist. It was all a seamless whole, from the start up the slope to the finish in the trees, and no anxious half hour — not even a half hour of panic — could have made me so crazy that my senses could have been fooled that badly. Later, when the memory faded some, I could doubt that point; but there in the truck with Paul, my wrist still aching, the whole memory still in my body, I was certain of it.

Finally we were back at the mission. Aunt Miriam came out to greet us, and we told her about Luke and David. Paul said he'd go back up the next day to make sure they got out all right; he glanced at me as he said it. And he smiled as he said good night, that small smile I had seen before. . . . For a second I saw in his eyes a clear acknowledgment of what had happened. And I understood: Paul was an Indian sorcerer; he could be in two places at once. But then he was gone, and I wasn't so sure.

I found that my skin could ripple with goose bumps even immersed in the hot water of my aunt's big old bathtub; all I had to do was remember that look, that smile, the moment on the cliff face, seeing Paul under that piñon. . . . Despite my exhaustion I slept very poorly that night; I kept jerking awake as I slipped off the face . . . and it would all come pouring in again, until I moaned at the bright fresh fear of it. Would it never ease, this fear?

The next day about noon Luke and David drove up in Luke's VW, laughing over great adventures of their own: Luke had carried David part of the way, they had slept in the trail, Luke had hiked to the trading post and back in the middle of the night, to make sure no one was waiting and worrying. . . . These adventures sounded quite mundane to me. Luke had already heard some of what had happened to me from Paul, and he laughed at my silence, thinking I was only embarrassed at ignoring Paul's advice and taking off cross-country. I imagine I didn't show much of a sense of humor about it.

The day after that it was time to leave. Luke was going to drive us all the way to Phoenix to catch a plane, and then come all the way back; he was looking forward to the drive.

We were out in front saying our

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good-byes to Aunt Miriam, when Paul drove up in his truck. Only later did it occur to me that he had come specifically to say good-bye to us. To me. Only later did I recall we were driving through Flagstaff, only later did I put it together, that for Paul I was . . . I don't know what, exactly.

He got out and walked over. Same jeans, same shirt. . . . He smiled at David and me and shook our hands. I recognized the grip, recognized it exactly. He looked me in the eye, nodded once, solemnly, as if to confirm my thought: *it happened*. He tapped the side of his head with his finger. "That was a good hike," he said to me. "Remember."

We got into the VW. As we drove off, Paul and Miriam stood side by side, waving — Paul looking right at me, nowhere else — and the two of them had identical expressions on their faces, that expression you see in the faces of your older relatives, as you wave good-bye to them after an infrequent, too-short visit: they're fond of you, they love you, they look at you with an honesty only the old have, thinking this might be the last good-bye, the last time they will ever get to see you. *Pleasure, sorrow, the loved one, leaving; will I see that one again before I die?*

Remember. Many years have passed since that happened; my great-aunt Miriam died in 1973, and as it turned out I never did see her again. And I never heard another word of my friend Paul, from that time to this.

But I've thought about him, oh believe me I have: and every single time I have brought myself to think honestly about it, to remember it truly and admit to myself that such an impossible thing happened to me, my skin has reacted with its fearful shivered rippling; just a ghost of the original fear in its power to shake me, but still most definitely there, a cold, uncanny contact with . . . something *other*. Even writing this account, here in a quiet room halfway around the world, nineteen years away, I have felt that shiver — once, in fact, as strongly as any since the first time: the room disappeared, and I was back there in those pines, Paul lying there. . . .

Naturally I have attempted, many times, to explain to myself what happened that afternoon. I have read of the Indian shamans of the Southwest with more than the usual interest, and recalling the masks and jugs I glimpsed so briefly at Paul's hogan, I suspect he could have been one. The Navaho are a pretty secular people, but Paul had business with the Hopi, unusual for a Navaho; and you don't get any stranger than the Hopi. And the Navaho treated Paul differently, too; he had a sort of power over them. . . . People are skeptical of Castaneda, and I suppose they should be — I probably would be too — but sometimes when I was reading those books, that shaman spoke right to me, through a

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face I knew. . . . Yes, it could be I was befriended by a shaman, and shown a little of the world beyond.

And of course the idea has returned to me, often, that I hallucinated Paul's presence, in my fear and need calling up his image to get me up the last, most difficult part of the climb. Sure. It's the explanation that makes the most sense, the one I believe in myself most often. But . . . a hallucinated figure, an imagined conversation — those are one thing. A hallucinated cliff face, an imagined fall? For me, somehow, those are in a different category; and I have never been able to believe that I was that completely disconnected from reality. Because that *hand on my wrist!* My God, how to tell it? I was hanging there in space, falling, and that hand on my wrist *pulled me up.* It pulled me up to safety, to the life I have lived since then. . . . And *I felt it.*

So. In the end I always have to let it be. Something strange happened to me, out there in the desert; I don't know what.

But lately, when I think about it, I always see the look that was on Paul's face as we drove away from the mission, and out of his life. And I see him trying to jump the giant gap between our lives, to teach me a little, mostly with looks; I see him letting me hike off on my own; I feel that hand on my wrist, pulling me up. . . . And now when I remember that impossible

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moment, I have been filled with some sort of huge, cloudy feeling — call it grace: my spirit has soared at the thought of it, flying like a shaman over the surface of this world, exhilarated and intensely happy. Either way it was a gift, you see; a gift from Paul, or from the world. Because consider it: if Paul was a shaman, and out of his feeling for me sent his spirit down that canyon wall to help me, while the rest of him slumbered there in the sun under a piñon pine — then human beings have mysterious powers that we poor civilized rational people are unaware of, and we are much greater than we know. But if, on the other hand, I imagined Paul's presence there above me, if I alone was there to clasp myself as I fell, so that I pulled myself up that cliff, by the power of my mind, and by the strength of my desire to live — then we are free indeed.

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The Damnation Game, Clive Barker, Ace/-Putnam, 18.95

L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future, Vol. III, Algis Budrys, Ed., Bridge, $4.50

I had the privilege the other day of stopping by Oberlin College and hearing visiting writer Somtow Sucharitkul read from his novel-in-progress. It's a horror novel, so it's by "S.P. Somtow," and it's about half completed. I suggest to you that you should, without fail, get a copy when it appears.

It's about snow, and werewolves, and Sioux Indians, and it's ingenious as hell. It's also markedly literate, in the classical sense. It's written in educated English, with many felicities of image and allusion. Clearly a great deal of homework has gone into it. (So have a lot of witty inside jokes: they don't impair the reading of the novel *qua* novel, at least in the parts I'm aware of.)

The striking thing about it, though, is *how* classical it is. Up to now, most modern horror fiction has had modern genre signatures all over it. You could clearly see a lineage that included *Black Mask* crime writing or *Unknown* fantasy, or both; there might also be some definite trace of H.P. Lovecraft, but even he, of course, was a writer who emerged after the turn of the present century and to some extent was conditioned by the pulp proliferation that made a clamorous billboard of every newsstand

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every week and taught us all to write short, direct, and fast.

I was struck, last week, by how different Somtow's novel seemed. It is in fact modelled on icons created and popularized by newsstand-borne literatures, but you might be surprised by how hard it is to see that, because the language, pace and length come out of Henry James leavened by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is as if Ned Buntline had never propagated the dime novel and even Hugo Gernsback had never been. Moreover, there is not much if any visible bow to Stephen King. Again, it's unlikely the genre would be there to support this creation if there had been no King, but with — in effect — King's help, here is an artwork being created that bypasses him literarily.

Jeez!, I thought, we are seeing here a new mode a-borning, clearly in touch with a contemporary public, but founded on the previous century's art.*

And I was quite right about that, it strongly appears. This is because even as I thought this, while reaching for the book I was going to review first here today, Clive Barker was sneaking up on me with that book. And it is in the same mode. Clearly Somtow could be said to be responding to some fundamental new development in the art; it had become time for this new mode to emerge, and my friend has detected that on some perceptive level, but Barker has moved his hands just a little faster from a somewhat earlier start.

The Damnation Game bears on its jacket this encomium:

> "I have seen the future of the horror genre, and it is named Clive Barker. He is so good that I am almost literally tongue-tied. He makes the rest of us look like we've been asleep for the past ten years."
>
> —Stephen King

Meanwhile, *Time* is quoted as evoking the hallowed names of Edith Wharton and Henry James and speaking of Barker "transcending" the genre and giving it "a new legitimacy."

Well, whenever you see *Time* climbing on board a new literary bandwagon, you know (A) they're scrambling to catch up to what their book-and-author people have been hearing on the New York art-crowd *thē dansant* circuit, and (B) somebody's winding up to give the hoary old speech about how this or that book can't be "genre" fiction because it's too good.

Stay with Steve King, instead; he butters his own bread and is well past the point of having to kiss anyone's whoopee cushion. Of course, he seems

I feel there's little doubt The Turn of The Screw *is a mid-nineteenth-century work, or that James, even more than Lovecraft, had his head in the past. Dear Sir or Madam, I may be right.*

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to be saying something of the same sort as *Time*'s fellow, but in his case the admiration is a personally knowledgeable, craftsmanly one, and it comes from the person whose skills started the current horror-fiction boom (Hush, William Peter Blatty).

And I think King's right. Barker, hitherto an up and coming short-story writer (collected in *Clive Barker's Books of Blood*, and cetera), has produced a masterly novel that even a lit. professor couldn't help but be impressed by. It's here as the first U.S. edition of a smash success in Britain, and the PR for it is massive, omnipresent, and full of the same half-hidden contempt for the "average" reader as the *Time* quote. In spite of this — that is, in spite of the fact that buying it might make you feel like a fink on yourself — you should buy it, because it doesn't fail to deliver what a good horror story should. And while it delivers it elegantly, which is unusual in this "genre", it delivers it as cleanly and readably as you have every right to expect.

The story — ah, well, it has a truly evil protagonist who visits horror on his victims with a persistence and ingenuity one can only marvel at, and, of course, who is himself horror's victim. It has an antagonist within whom evil and good, weakness and strength are at war, and who participates in boy-meets-girl young love seen as in a mirror crazed. And it has development that makes you wonder at the ways in which good can be horrible and evil sheerly perfect. So it does come to grips with the classic themes . . . love and death and all of that; the question of whether there actually is justice or whether that's a purely human white lie; *is* there something under the bed waiting for your hand?

Thrill a minute, really, even though at times toward the middle Barker is so busy getting the next set of trapdoors into position under you that he forgets to drip even just a drip of something to tide you over meanwhile.

What has the polite critics all in such a swivet is I think, a little bit of that, which they interpret as a sign of good taste, and a little bit of something else, which is Barker's ability to evoke interesting settings . . . Warsaw just at the end of World War II, when it is a wasted Hell on Earth; an English stately home converted into a fortress for a loathesome, egomaniacal plutocrat who fears his end at the protagonist's once-deft hands; a British slum; a gambling club; an abandoned dovecote. These are something more exotic than some moribund lumber town in Maine, as King would have it, or a gentrified Connecticut fishing village as Peter Straub has done it.

What these people remember about Wharton and James is that they were slow and well-spoken. They mistake Barker for slow, and he *is* well-spoken. Ipso facto, he's the artist they

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have all been waiting for so they could (A) Admit slyly that they've been regular fellars all along and (B) slyly admit no such thing.

Hell with 'em. It's a good — a very good — book nevertheless. Example: The book opens from the viewpoint of a figure called "the thief," who has become fascinated with rumors of a card-player who never loses and exacts terrible stakes. The thief soon cannot think of anything else but finding this individual and playing him. It is said that the player can't be found unless he permits it. The thief begins a forlorn round of searching.

> The thief became jittery with anticipation. In his dreams, when he was able to sleep, he wandered in Muranowski Square. It was filled with a fog like a living thing, which promised at any moment to divide and reveal the card-player. He was like a man in love.

I believe that last sentence is deliberately ambiguous. On Pages 52 and 53, within one passage of 500 words, Barker with ostensible offhandedness springs a basic surprise per paragraph, with each paragraph shifting the ostensible situation into a new and always more unsettling focus. On P. 150, his love/possession scene is handed in such a way that you squirm for the emotion you should feel, cannot find it, and gradually realize it had no name because while the scene is compellingly real, it has only the faintest, and only exactly sufficient resemblance, to any parallel in human experience. And then the follow-up to that scene is — words fail me — sheer brilliance.

And on, and on. Paced like *The Turn of The Screw*, it keeps telling you the horror will not come on the next page, then that you have seen the ultimate horror, then that some horror transcending it will not come on the next page. And each measured sentence measures that. *Time*, of course, would rather appreciate the technique, which is, by lit. standards, a considerable advance on King's and Straub's hugger-mugger plotting and slapdash prose. But Henry James is not what this field has been looking for, and if it were, King and/or Straub are quite sufficiently literate to have supplied it. What this field has been looking for, apparently, is the effect of Henry James combined with the utter fright that *M.R.* James could evoke without seeming effort. If King has seen the future, it is part of the past . . . but that, of course, makes perfect sense.

And as for the future of speculative fiction as a whole. . . .

I get to see it all the time, as Coordinating Judge of the Writers of The Future Contest, and then I get to inspect it more closely in editing the annual anthology which results from it. This year's is the third one — formally, *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writ-*

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ers of the Future Volume III — and the future is in good shape.

Fourteen stories, this time, by the twelve winners of the past year's Contest, plus two finalists. In addition to the reading experience offered by the fiction per se, there are four excellent essays primarily of service to the beginning writer. These are, respectively, "How to Impress an Editor" by master editor Frederik Pohl, "How to Sound Like an Expert" by scientist/stefnist Gregory Benford, "Building Plausible Futures" by futurist/technologist epeé-wielder Jerry Pournelle, and a cogent analysis of what art is by L. Ron Hubbard.

I'll get back to the stories, which, like those in the two earlier volumes, present a remarkable spectrum of styles and themes, and whose intrinsic qualities fully deserve the sorts of critical praise and reader-sales figures that are being earned by Vols. I and II. First, I want to talk about how this happened.

This *exists*, first of all, because L. Ron Hubbard created the Writers of The Future Contest and, to the time of his passing in January, 1986, sponsored it. (It's now sponsored by Bridge Publications, which also publishes the anthology and LRH's science fiction. There's been a change of address, and some modification in Contest management structure; these have met the steadily increasing workload. Nothing fundamental has changed.)

It exists, second of all, also because many of the biggest names in SF lend their time and attention to judging the winners, contributing essays to the anthology, and serving as instructors in the invitational writing-workshop program that has grown out of the Contest and the anthology. There is no way we could pay the actual costs incurred by people like Pohl, Benford, Pournelle, Anne McCaffrey, Larry Niven, Robert Silverberg, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny. So no attempt is made to do so. They receive token honoraria and, if they are to be believed, an intense satisfaction in locating, advising, and nurturing fresh talent.

And it *happens* because there is fresh talent out there; people who, despite the fact that they have had little or nothing professionally published, are capable of producing short stories and novelettes which are not merely publishable but remarkable. And the Contest is growing, steadily, swiftly, into a major feature of the SF community landscape, because this is demonstrably true, as demonstrated by the published results and the subsequent careers of many WOTF discoveries.

How come? Why don't the normal processes suffice to serve the same purpose? What does WOTF have that's particularly effective? Some of this — I don't know how much; quite a bit, I suppose — happens because at any given time there are writers who were not ready yesterday but are ready

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today. The Contest sweeps through the field every three months, offering significant outright grants of cash (plus impressive certificates and trophies), and it is going to be entered by a significant number of such people.

Some of it happens, I'm convinced, because WOTF has absolutely no editorial policies, no commitment to an established past, and no awareness of personality. The manuscripts are judged with the author's names removed, and the only criterion be that a panel of the top SF professionals consider the manuscript to contain a good story in the SF field, however each of them defines all that. I believe we get some writers who have been in touch with other editors and admired by other editors, but who have not fitted themselves into an agreed-on relationship with other editors. We on the one hand have an editor —I read all the manuscripts in the Contest — but on the other hand we don't have an editor in the traditional sense. Makes you think.

But I believe, too, that we get some writers and stories whose time was not yesterday; that they have arrived just as the field is ready to read them, and are part of a process of expansion and evolution which is very real, and operates on the readership and on writers. Makes you think even harder.

• • •

Anyway, buying, begging, borrowing, or sxxxxing a copy of *Vol. III* will get you all the material described above, plus a wonderful introduction by Algis Budrys, plus story blurbs intended to help you understand how people break in to professional writing, plus a complete set of Contest rules. (Among them is one that explains the anthology rights to the stories are negotiated-for separately, in addition to the Contest prizes, which include one annual grand prize worth an added $4,000.)

What it will also get you are fourteen reading experiences I think are each above average; I expect that no matter how quirky your taste, you will enjoy most of them. They range from weighty if graceful themes and styles to something much like slapstick comedy, with stops on the way for zaniness and remarkable thought-provocation. Some are long, some are quite short. It's a good mix. Some find startling new things in classic SF ideas, some merely content themselves with fresh perspectives on the human condition.

And on, and on. There is a lot here in this rather thick book, and if nothing else you ought to look at the cover, which is the first Frank Frazetta book cover in years, and one of the very few complete wraparound paintings he's ever done; furthermore, you don't see a Frazetta spaceship every day, and the lady with the wings is . . . ah, well, she *is*.

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This is a good thing and I tell you about it. I believe we can, in this third year, with the future bright before us, assume that its time has come.

Books to Look For

by Orson Scott Card

THE BROOM OF THE SYSTEM, David Foster Wallace, (Viking Penguin, cloth/paper, 467 pp, $7.95)

Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, falls into that area where literary fiction and science fiction seamlessly meet. Call it absurdism, existential comedy, or alternate reality, it contains some of the best and liveliest storytelling in the English language. R.A. Lafferty and Samuel Beckett, Rudy Rucker and, now, David Foster Wallace: the audience for these brilliant writers must discard all expectations from the start.

Broom is set in 1990 in Cleveland, perched on the edge of the Great Ohio Desert — the G.O.D., as it is called. Lenore Beadsman, scion of the founding family of a giant baby-food corporation, works as a $4-per-hour switchboard operator for the publishing company Frequent & Vigorous; Rick Vigorous, her boss, is also her insanely jealous lover, getting information about her from the unethical psychiatrist they both visit.

Lenore's great-grandmother, who must live in a room heated to 98.6 in order to maintain her body temperature, has disappeared from her old-folks' home, taking a score of residents and staff with her. Beyond that the plot gets complicated.

It also gets funny. The humor is sophomoric sometimes — for instance, an operator named Judith Prietht and a repairman named Peter Abbott. Sometimes it is satirical, as with the plastic adult-size highway-legal cars made by Mattel, and the town in the shape of Jayne Mansfield's nude profile, with zoning laws requiring realistic colors, making it a favorite landing approach route with airline pilots.

The humor often achieves true brilliance, however, the kind of incisive wit that is too funny to be summed up, as with the unforgettable scene in a restaurant as the spectacu-

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larly obese Bombardini orders dinner, or the scene in Lenore's apartment where her parrot echoes *all* the words her roommate said in preparing to dump a boyfriend.

Wallaces' incipient MFA gives him license to bore, but he rarely uses it.

What he *does* is shake loose all expectations of form. The story is written in dialogue, in monologue, as a diary entry, in present tense, in past tense, as a clipping from a paper — every imaginable voice and form seems to be in this book. Yet Wallace makes it all come together as a unified vision of inspired madness. This is Wallace's first novel. God help us all when he gets some practice.

SANDKINGS, George R.R. Martin, adapted by Doug Moench, Pat Broderick, & Neal McPheeters (DC, 8.5 X 11 paper, 48 pp, all color, $5.95)

I'm not a comics fan; few "graphic novels" capture my attention, and none have come close to duplicating, for me, the power of film or theatre or written fiction.

Add to that attitude the fact that I regard George R.R. Martin's novelet "Sandkings" as a science fiction classic, one that created unforgettable images, and you can understand that I worried about what would happen to it in the process of adaptation to graphic novel form. How could any artist hope to match what I conjured up in my own mind while reading Martin's words?

Well, no artist could, not even a genius, and the team that produced this book are not geniuses. But the DC Comics version of *Sandkings* made a believer out of me, anyway. Because even though the art was not perfect, the story still carried its original force, and while some of my own images were lost, this version helped strengthen other scenes that had *not* has as much power in the text version.

Leave aside the question of whether the project was worth doing at all. (Why is it worth adapting fiction for the movies, either, except that some people respond more to one medium than another?) It is enough to say that this adaption is faithfully and competently done: the story lived, with the clarity and power of Martin's writing intact.

EMPERY, Michael P. Kube-McDowell, (Berkley, paper,. 325 pp)
EMPRISE, Michael P. Kube-McDowell, (Berkley, paper)
ENIGMA, Michael P. Kube-McDowell, (Berkley, paper)

Michael P. Kube-McDowell is emerging as the finest new writer of cosmic science fiction in twenty years. Macrohistory is almost impossibly difficult to write; few have the audacity to attempt it, and fewer still the vision and skill to bring it off. Kube-McDowell has it all.

Empery is the final volume in a trilogy — a *true* trilogy, not a single continuous work cut up in three parts

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(like *Lord of the Rings*), or a series that temporarily has only three installments in print (remember when Berkley was hyping the "*Dune Trilogy*"?).

In the first volume, *Emprise*, the human race becomes unified in order to send out a ship to greet the first known alien race — only to discover that the "aliens" are also human, and consider themselves a colony from Earth.

In the second volume, *Enigma*, Merritt Thackery meets Gabriel, one of a race of energy-beings called the D'Shanna, who takes him to the "spindle" at the heart of the fabric of space-time; there he sees that an ice-age technological culture on Earth colonized other worlds 70,000 years ago — and then was destroyed by an extraordinarily powerful alien species, the Mizari. The Mizari are still there, and humanity is about to provoke exactly the same destruction.

In the third volume, *Empery*, some humans maneuver to make a preemptive attack on the Mizari, as an ancient and withered Merritt Thackery arrives again at the spindle to discover the true nature of the Mizari and the futility of any attack on them.

That is what these books are about on a macro-level. But Kube-McDowell has not let the macro-story defeat the micro-events. The individual human beings in all three books are believable and fascinating; the social tensions, the community life, the cultures, all are real. Even the "villains" are fully justified — no one is purely evil, for all have clear, even reasonable (or at least understandable) motives for what they do.

In short, this is fiction that satisfies as much at the story level as it does at the idea level. The *Newsday* cover quote that compares Kube-McDowell with Arthur C. Clarke at his best is, for once, the plain truth, not hype at all. This does not mean that Kube-McDowell in any way imitates Clarke; rather it means that Kube-McDowell is able to bring cosmic ideas and human stories together in a way previously achieved only by Clarke and a handful of other clear-minded visionaries.

What astonishes me is that this trilogy is Kube-McDowell's first book-length work. In the future, we can expect to see him produce even deeper, richer novels — certainly avoiding such missteps as the implausible "fission blanket" and the rather clumsy plot device of having people stumble toward war because of misunderstanding, then avoid it at the last minute as a result of near-miraculous offstage maneuvering.

One of Kube-McDowell's strengths is a skill I have seen in few other fiction writers — the ability to deal with human beings as political animals. Most writers, confronted by a political situation, either give us empty and tedious formal meetings, or reduce politics to personal squabbles, avoiding political issues entirely.

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Kube-McDowell performs the miracle. He gives us political meetings that are believable, tense and involving, yet he never tries to "juice it up" with foolish theatrics. Instead he prepares us so carefully for these political climaxes that *we* see all the subtle interplays without the author intruding to point them out.

This trilogy — called, irrelevantly, *The Trigon Disunity* (I prefer to think of them as "Kube-McDowell's *E* books") — is not a perfect work of fiction; this is not Kube-McDowell's *Helliconia* or *Book of the New Sun*. But it's a powerful work, a fundamental work; it signals the revivification of a kind of science fiction that for a time was on the wane. Let the cyberpunks have their flash and dazzle; let the literati diddle with allusion, angst, and assonance: Kube-McDowell reminds us that the substance of fiction is in the story, not the performance. Admire the work of the redecorators, yes, but meanwhile Kube-McDowell is strengthening the foundation of science fiction; it will count for more in the long run.

THE STARS MY DESTINATION, Alfred Bester, (Franklin Watts, cloth, 197 pp, $15.95)

It has been said that one of the great strengths of science fiction, as a genre, is that its entire history is still in print, and new readers can live through every movement in its turn. I certainly followed that pattern — I read Merritt's *The Face in the Abyss* before discovering the "golden age" work of Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke; then I read Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* anthologies, which led me to Delany and LeGuin; since then I've had only to keep up with current work.

One of the problems of science ficiton, however, is that with so many works emerging in recent years, it's almost impossible, if you're "keeping up," to go back and fill in gaps in your reading. That, too, I have experienced — I didn't read any Philip K. Dick until his posthumously published novel *Radio Free Albemuth* last year, for instance; there are other important sf writers whose work I have never read at all.

Like Alfred Bester. I knew his name and nothing else. So when the beautifully-published Franklin Watts hardcover reprint of *The Stars My Destination* arrived at my home, I sighed and told myself that with so many *new* books to read and review, I couldn't possibly spend the time to read something *old*.

I'm glad I didn't listen to me.

I picked it up. I started reading about Gully Foyle, sole survivor of his spaceship's wreck, as he vows revenge on the ship that could have rescued him and turned away. In Bester's strange and fully-realized future, I saw Foyle at first disfigured, then reshaped into a human being worthy of admiration; I saw his visions of himself

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aflame, and then watched him live out the vision, and from his personal crucible pour out a new human order of trust and hope and dire risk.

And as I read, I discovered what many other readers for thirty years have known, ever since this novel first appeared in the pages of *Galaxy*. *The Stars My Destination* will never be an old book.. It is as new today as it was in 1956. I was five years old then, and so I missed it on the first round; and many of you reading this magazine are even younger than I. But I assure you that this book is more vigorous and fresh than most "new" books you'll see this year. And it's important enough, true enough, to be worth spending the paltry sixteen bucks to have it permanently on your shelves.

"'You're insane, man. You've handed a loaded gun to children.'

"'Stop treating them like children and they'll stop behaving like children. . . . Explain the loaded gun to them. Bring it all out into the open. . . . No more secrets from now on. . . . No more telling the children what's best for them to know. . . . Let 'em all grow up. It's about time.'

"'Christ, he *is* insane.'"

Yeah, maybe., A glorious insanity. Folks, read this book. And if you possibly can, *buy* this book to reward the publisher for bringing *The Stars My Destination* back to us in such a bright and lasting form.

• • •

GOLDEN DAYS, Carolyn See, (McGraw-Hill, cloth, 196 pp, $15.95)

Carolyn See is a mainstream novelist, so of course *Golden Days* does not reflect the latest scientific findings about the effects of nuclear holocaust. Indeed, there are moments in the book when it crosses the border into fantasy, as the security-obsessed narrator become involved with Lion Boyce, whose typical California self-enhancement "seminars" actually seem to work.

Yet such genre issues are unimportant here. What See is telling us is a tale of human hope and its ability to transcend rational despair.

The narrator emerges from a dismal past into a surprisingly joyful present — loving her children, content with her lover, in touch with a wonderful lunatic friend, and financially secure.

Then comes the holocaust. All her "self-enhancement" magic can't restore the terrible burns, the sickness, the deaths, the loss. Yet in a joyful moment after years of bare survival, the narrator discovers that even in their loneliness on this once-crowded earth, there is a nobility to their lives. Lion Boyce's over-enthusiastic words come naturally to her lips; she becomes the storyteller, the firestarter, even, perhaps, the inspired con artist of the new age.

For the narrator the holocaust becomes a genuine Rapture, because only a certain kind of person was able

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to survive: "the wackos, the ones who used their belief systems . . . the ones who *relinquished* control, who took it as it came." See's clear and lovely style leads us into a book that truly earns its last four sentences:

"But I say there was a race of hardy laughers, mystics, crazies, who knew their real homes, or who had been drawn to this gold coast for years, and they lived through the destroying light, and on, into Light ages.

"You can believe who you want to. But I'm telling you, don't believe those other guys.

"Believe me."

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Alan Foster's last story here was a fantasy chiller ("The Thunderer," April 1987). His latest is science fiction; it concerns the observation of a primitive alien race, and it is not entirely serious . . .

Norg Gleeble Gop

BY

ALAN DEAN FOSTER

"It's just that they're so *cute*," Deering said.

Her friend and fellow zenologist Al Toney disagreed. "The Inrem are a primitive, utterly alien race that we still know next to nothing about, which is why SA has gone to the trouble of sponsoring this expedition. Although the attitude of the natives toward us thus far has been friendly, we don't know near enough about their culture to start making generalizations. 'Cute' qualifies as a generalization, Cerice, and not a very scientific one at that. These people are hunter-gatherers who have developed a complex social structure we are just beginning to understand. Their language remains incomprehensible, with its floating internal phrases and switchable vowel sounds, and their rituals no less confusing."

Cerice Deering leaned back in her chair and stared out the glass port at the surface of Rem V. The sun was slightly hotter than that of her home, the atmosphere thick and moist. And it boasted that rarest of all discoveries, a native intelligent race. How intelligent remained to be determined. She considered herself fortunate to be counted among those designated to do the determining.

Not only was being a member of the expedition exciting and enlightening, it could be a career-maker. *If* she could come up with something spectacular. The competition to be first with a breakthrough was keen among the expedition's scientists. As one of the youngest, it would be hard for her to make a mark for herself. Or so her colleagues thought. She smiled a secret smile at her private plan. Fortune favors the bold, or so the old Latin claimed. She intended to find out.

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The clash of a bold warrior's undying love and an evil sorceror's hateful magic

KENNETH C. FLINT

THE DARK DRUID

The stunning conclusion of a majestic saga

BANTAM

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She could not confide in Toney. While he was a friend, he was also a competitor, and he certainly would have disapproved of her intentions.

"Where's your sense of adventure, Al?" she asked teasingly.

"In the scientific method. In the careful filing of observations for collation at a later date, at which time the real discoveries are made. In learning patiently and assuredly. This isn't a play, Cerice. The Inrem are not special effects. You don't plunge blindly into an alien culture. That can be dangerous."

She couldn't keep from laughing aloud. "The Inrem? Dangerous? Are we talking about the same aliens, Al?"

"Never trust appearances. That's a truism from human anthropology that applies just as well to aliens."

"So we squat here and pick up a useful datum or two a day. Science at a snail's pace." She put her long legs up on the table, knowing it would distract him. "Take this Gop ceremony they're having tonight. How the hell are we supposed to study it if we're forbidden to attend?"

Toney looked uncomfortable; partly because of the question, partly because Deering was wearing only shorts and halter. Rem V was a hot world and getting hotter, he reflected.

"We can't study it. We'll have to wait until we're invited in, or until Dhurabaya and his people crack this ridiculous language, and we learn how to ask permission properly."

"It's not ridiculous. The Inrem don't realize that, to us, their language sounds like baby talk."

"I know. But it's still hard to keep a straight face when the local chief waddles up to you and says with all seriousness something like, 'Neemay goo ga weeble fist,' or whatever it was he told us yesterday."

"That's one reason why I think they're so cute."

"He might've been cursing me out."

"Bull. You're paranoid, Al. The Inrem have been downright hospitable ever since we set up camp here. They've been curious and helpful every time we've asked them for something — except for excluding us from the occasional ceremony."

"You've got something on your mind." Toney looked up at her sharply.

"Who, me? I'm just a junior researcher. Half the senior scientists on this barge don't think I have a mind." She pulled one knee back to her chest and locked her hands around her ankle.

Night, and the creaks of an alien world. Whistles and hoots, squeals and buzzes assaulted the encampment. Deering wasn't worried as she slipped out of camp and made her way through the forest toward the big Inrem village where they'd been conducting their field studies. The expedition

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had been on Rem for six months, and nothing bigger than a biting bug had challenged them. Violet leaves caressed her thighs. Webbers scurried out of her path, the big fluorescent eyes glowing in the light of her glowtube.

It was about a mile and a half over level, relatively dry gound to the village. She could hear the steady susurration of the chant long before she located a good place to make her observations. The Inrem were very big on ceremonies, performing at least one a week. Most of them they politely permitted the visiting humans to study. Only a few had been declared off-limits, like this Gop ceremony tonight.

Deering knew it was an especially important ceremony, but she and her colleagues had not been able to determine why. Much of the interspecies communication between human and Inrem still took the form of signs and gestures as the expedition's linguists struggled to crack the complex if silly-sounding native tongue.

She was breaking a taboo as she set up her recording equipment on the little rise overlooking the village, but she wasn't frightened. An expedition botanist had accidentally killed an Inrem adolescent two weeks ago, but even that wasn't sufficient to provoke their anger. They seemed to respond with understanding and even compassion for the distraught visitor.

The village consisted of stone and wood longhouses arranged in a circle around a central square. There were small openings in the ground in front of each longhouse. As near as they had been able to discover, the openings led to an intricate complex of tunnels of unknown extent. They were too small to admit humans (the Inrem averaged about three feet in height), and so what studies they had been able to carry out had been done only with instruments. The general consensus so far held that the caves served to store food and provide private links between longhouses. They were not for defense. There was no war among the Inrem.

The ceremony was already under way. There was no carved image, no deity to be worshiped. The Inrem rituals remained an open book, attendant upon multiple interpretations. She hoped tonight's work would allow her to make several. If nothing else, merely recording the forbidden ceremony would be a real feather in her cap.

She was just inserting a new cube in her recorder, when half a dozen armed Inrem materialized from the trees behind her. Eying them warily, she moved to put the recorder between the natives and herself. She had a small pistol with her, but using it on a native, even in self-defense, would result in her being censured and sent home in disgrace.

Nothing in the Inrem's expressions or movements betrayed a hint of hos-

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tility, however. The senior warrior stepped forward. Like all of his kind, he walked on a pair of thick, stumpy legs. His squat body seemed to have been fashioned from gray putty. There was no neck; only a tapering of the torso that was called a head. His short tail twitched as he sniffed at her with his flexible trunk and its rosette, fringed tip. The teeth in his mouth were blunt, and something akin to a squashed derby decorated his bald pate.

"Si mokle reerip ba boovle," he declaimed. "Norg gleeble gop."

As always, Deering had to repress a smile. Not that the expression would have meant anything to the Inrem. "Look, I don't mean to intrude." The words were for her own benefit, since no native could understand a word of English. She turned both hands palm-up in a universal gesture of conciliation. "I just want to watch." Now she did smile. "I'll leave if you insist."

The Inrem had built-in smiles, like porpoises. "Norg gleeble gop," the senior repeated.

"Oh O.K., whatever. 'Norg gleeble gop.'"

This appeared to please the warriors no end. Apparently she'd said exactly the right thing. Poor Toney and his paranoia. A pity he and the other old fogies weren't here to witness this minor triumph of improvised interspecies communication. You just had to go at it boldly and with the right spirit, she reflected.

The senior uttered another delighted "Norg gleeble gop," and gently took her hand to lead her down to the village. No one objected as she picked up her still functioning recorder. She felt gratified and exhilarated. This was what science was all about, the rush that came from making a breakthrough discovery, the thrill of observing what none had seen before her.

A few of the villagers paused in the middle of their clumsy but high-spirited dances as she was led into the square. For the first time she sensed something akin to hostility, until the senior warrior escorting her raised a hand and declared loudly, "Norg gleeble gop! Sookle wa da fookie!" Then the performers were all smiles again.

No one bothered her as she set up her instruments, angling it on a group of elder Inrem females. The species had three sexes: male, female, and neuter. Behind her the alien music rose to a deafening din as a cluster of musicians pounded, tootled, and plucked furiously at their instruments. It was by far the most impressive performance so far witnessed, and Deering concentrated on her recorder. There was a driving, atonal beat to the music that was distracting and fascinating.

With a cry, the performers and dancers scattered. Normally this signified that the ceremony was at an end, but the Gop was different. In-

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stead of the chief matriarch retiring to her longhouse, she gathered her favorite male and neuter around her and joined the rest of the population in forming small groups in front of the numerous cave openings. Deering adjusted her angle from narrow to wide, trying to include as many groups as possible.

Then she gasped and looked up from the eyepiece of the recorder.

Something was coming out of each of the holes in front of the longhouses. Slowly at first, tentatively searching, each pale pink worm was as thick as a man's arm. They tapered to points and were innocent of features; no eyes or ears, no mouths, no nostrils. The worms swayed back and forth as if in time to the now silent music that had called them forth.

Occasionally a worm would touch one of the chanters, whereupon the individual so blessed would tumble onto its back and begin writhing in ecstasy. Deering worked her recorder frantically. Here was some kind of solemn symbiotic relationship no one on the expedition had so much as suspected. What the Inrem derived from the worms was a matter for future speculation. Their mere existence, not to mention special relationship to the natives, would cause pandemonium among her colleagues. She had slipped secretly out of camp seeking something unique and had been rewarded beyond her wildest dreams.

The worms were now swaying low over the twisting, jerking bodies of the blessed, doing something — it was difficult to see because the standing members of each group blocked her line of sight. She shoved another cube into the recorder.

Something touched her lightly in the small of her back.

Whirling, she found one of the worms not a meter from her face. Despite its lack of eyes, it seemed to be studying her curiously. Probably had a highly developed tactile sense, she told herself, breathing hard. It leaned forward. As she stood frozen to the spot, it brushed her right forearm. She held her ground. There were no teeth to defend against, no poison. Only a thin, pleasantly fragrant secretion of some kind.

Moving slowly so as not to alarm it, she adjusted her recorder for close-up work. All around her the worms were lightly touching and swaying over fallen villagers. A truly wild thought came to her.

What if the worms were not individual creatures, but merely the tentacles, the limbs of something much bigger that pulsed and lived beneath the village? She envisioned it rising in response to the Gop music, digging its way surfaceward from unimaginable subterranean depths, to gently caress and commune with those who had summoned it forth.

The worm touched her again, startling her this time. She felt her-

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self quiver all over, almost as though she'd received some kind of injection. That was impossible. The worm (tentacle?) had nothing to inject with. But it had left a glistening patch of that perfumed secretion on her arm. Suppose it could be absorbed through the skin? For the first time she felt uneasy. She was out here alone, surrounded by delirious aliens and giant pink worms. She'd learned enough to ensure herself a commendation. Better not push her luck.

A warm sense of tranquility and well-being was spreading through her. She started to collapse the recorder. "I — I think I'd better be going now," she said to the Inrem nearest her. It smiled back up at her placidly.

"Norg gleeble gop?"

"Yeah. Norg gleeble gop."

She hoisted the recorder and turned. She made it to the edge of the forest before she collapsed.

She awoke in a bed in the camp infirmary. Chief Physician Meachim was staring down at her. Disapprovingly, she thought.

Since nothing was holding her back, she sat up.

"They found you just outside the camp perimeter." Meachim was frowning to himself. "Your cubes have been played back. Everyone's arguing with everyone else. The biologists are going crazy."

She touched her forehead, her temple. She felt fine. Better than fine; she felt terrific. "I must've passed out. It was pretty exciting. I'm O.K.?"

Meachim shrugged. "You look great to me, but that's nothing new. Funny thing, though. I tried to bring you around with compol and damrin. Your system rejected both. But your vital signs stayed perfectly normal, so I didn't press it. You started to wake up about five minutes ago. The monitor notified me. Now you sit up by yourself with no apparent ill effects. Trying to put me out of a job?"

She slid off the bed and did a few experimental jumping jacks. "Sorry, but there's nothing wrong with me, Meachim. Know what? I'm going to be famous."

"That's what everyone's saying. The captain would like to have you drawn and quartered, figuratively speaking, but the scientists won't hear of it. They're slavering over your recordings and can't wait for you to lead a full-scale survey group back to the village. I imagine they figure you've got a special in with the Inrem."

"All it takes is guts, in science the same as everything else. I can go?"

"This infirmary's for sick people, Cerice. You aren't sick." He turned and gestured. "Someone waiting to see you."

Al Toney entered. "You ought to be shot. Instead I think they'll canonize you. You've made a discovery that's more important than everything we've learned about the Inrem to date."

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"I know."

He shook his head. "I wonder if you have any idea how lucky you were."

"Luck had nothing to do with it, Al. I just had the Inrem figured right. Cute; remember?"

"I guess so. Oh, Dhurabaya's made some progress. Maybe when we go back to your village — that's what everyone's calling it now; your village — we can ask the right questions."

"You don't have to know how to ask the right questions if you've got the right attitude. The Inrem know empathy when they feel it."

Toney nodded and looked thoughtful. "Silly-sounding speech they have, but logical, once you work out the roots. That's what Dhurabaya's people say. Take 'Norg Gleeble gop,' for instance. The Inrem have been using that phrase over and over for months." He started toward the door. She went with him, anxious to bask in the admiring stares of her envious colleagues.

"I remember. They were using it quite a bit during the ceremony."

"Really? Maybe that explains what kind of ceremony it was. Norg gleeble gop means 'pregnant.'"

"Your wife says to tell you she doesn't like the way you're managing the money she left you."

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Here is the longest and the best of the half dozen stories Andrew Weiner has contributed to F&SF over the years. It begins with an expedition across light years to track down an alien signal, and it ends in the most surprising places, a trailer camp for one . . .

Going to Meet the Alien

BY
ANDREW WEINER

1.

We were ten days out from Earth when we first began to hear the singing.

I was in the lounge playing bridge at the time. It was a game I had never really cared for that much, but there were times when I found myself playing it all the same, most recently when covering the Brazilian civil war a few years before, crouched over a greasy pack of cards in some plastiform foxhole while the B-52s roared overhead. Wars and interstellar journeyings, they elicited in me much the same uneasy combination of boredom and anxiety.

There is nothing very exciting, after all, about a long and uneventful voyage in the company of largely unsympathetic strangers, no matter how promising the destination. Oh, the *idea* of it was exciting enough in the abstract, full of awe and exaltation. But one so quickly adjusts to new ideas. Out of the nineteen men and women, and one child, on this ship, there were perhaps four or five with some useful work to perform during the course of the voyage. For the rest of us, it was a period of suspension. We were only waiting. Waiting to meet the alien.

And so we were playing bridge, although I was not taking the proceedings all that seriously. Otherwise I would probably have been furious with my partner, Lucinda Morrow, who was playing by a set of conventions known only to herself. Our opponents were wiping the floor with us, and I was almost glad of the interruption, despite its thoroughly

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disconcerting nature.

Dick Handley, our expedition's chief scientist, was midway to completing his bid of four no-trumps when suddenly he froze, hand in mid-air above the table.

I heard it at the same moment, if that is really the right word. Soft, crystalline, insistently crooning, the wordless singing was inside my head rather than outside it, inside all of our heads.

Cautiously, we exchanged glances: Handley still frozen in shock, mouth hanging open; Phil Heintzmann sitting across the table from him, his customary smile fading, shaking his head in bemusement as if to dislodge the strange sound now echoing within it; and Lucinda, face shining with delight.

Perhaps we would have tried to ignore it, ignore this bizarre and inexplicable intrusion and proceed with our game as if nothing had happened, like city dwellers who skirt the violence and madness of their street. Perhaps we would have tried, had it not been for Lucinda.

"Praise the Lord," she said, throwing her remaining cards down faceup on the table. "Praise the Lord Alien."

It was a predictable enough response from the designated representative on our mission of the weird and whimsical yet wildly successful Church of the Alien. By far the fastest-growing faith on Earth, it claimed more than 100 million converts worldwide in the three years since the announcement of the Signal, the same Signal that had sparked our current voyage. Or, as Lucinda liked to describe it, our pilgrimage.

Indeed, the very ship in which we now traveled had been partly bankrolled by Lucinda's church. It had in fact made the largest single investment of any private-interest group supporting the enterprise. That had been a difficult pill for the government to swallow, but they had swallowed it all the same, once more conventional sources of capital had been exhausted.

"What exactly do you hear, Lucinda?" I asked.

"Angels," she said. "A chorus of angels, singing a welcome as they carry us on their wings to their resting place."

It was a tenet of Lucinda's faith that God — and perhaps heaven, too — was to be found in the Epsilon Eridani star system, from which the Signal was believed to originate. I found it difficult to believe that someone of Lucinda's obvious intelligence could actually believe that. But she did.

A sometime Atlantic City croupier, who had dabbled previously in many of the world's major and minor religions, Lucinda had been one of the earliest converts to the new faith. She had risen rapidly through its ranks, and had now been dispatched on this mission as the eyes and ears of the Alien Revelator himself, Judd Maho-

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ney, the former Bible salesman and small-time felon who presided over the Church of the Alien.

There were those who wondered about Lucinda's high standing in her church. Gossip held that she was Mahoney's mistress, and perhaps that was true. And yet, whatever her relationship to Mahoney, I suspected that she might be the real brains behind the church. In interviewing the undeniably charismatic Revelator himself on several excruciating occasions, I had been less than impressed with his candlepower.

"Are they saying anything?" I asked Lucinda. "These angels of yours?"

"No," Lucinda said. "Their music is gift enough."

Presumably, then, we were hearing much the same thing.

I threw in my own hand. The singing rolled on inside my head. I looked to Dick Handley.

"Well?" I asked. "Should we?"

Handley blinked at me, as if trying to recognize me.

"Should we what?"

"Praise the Lord Alien? Or do you have some better idea?"

"It must be . . . some sort of aural hallucination," he said, clearly shaken, but still game to make the attempt at instant rationalization. "A perceptual distortion. Some side effect of traveling within midspace."

I thought about that for a moment.

"What about the test runs?" I asked. Prior to our mission there had been extensive tests of the ship, including a prolonged venture into midspace. "Surely something like this would have been reported?"

"It didn't happen during the tests," Handley said. "But then, we've come a lot farther than they did. Perhaps this is something that happens as you get deeper into midspace, these auditory disturbances."

Midspace was the medium through which our ship was now moving, if moving was the proper word for it. By traveling in this way, we would arrive at our destination without significant lapse of time, despite having crossed eleven light-years. We had learned how to perform this very desirable trick from the Signal, but our scientists still didn't fully understand exactly how it worked. And I understood even less than our scientists.

During our briefings, one expert had suggested picturing midspace as a kind of fault line through the metaphorical planes of space and time, a temporary crack in reality that would open up to allow our passage. As those metaphorical planes closed in upon us, we would be pushed back out into normal space, as if the universe were bearing down to eject us from its bowels.

This had made some sort of sense to me, although another expert had told me that it was nothing like that at all. Really, I preferred to leave that sort of thing to the science journalists.

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"But why . . . ?" I started to ask, when Heintzmann broke in.

"Hey look," he said. "Look at little Sammy."

We looked across the room to where, a few minutes before, our mission mascot, our shaman, our sometime mouthpiece of the gods, ten-year-old Sammy Mickelowitz, had been sitting, blank-faced as always, watching an old Road Runner cartoon on the vidscreen. Now Sammy was up on his feet and doing a weird shambling shuffle, as if in tune to the music inside his mind, his features distorted into what was unmistakably a grin.

It was a startling performance from a child who was only intermittently interested in feeding himself.

"Jesus," I said. "The kid is *dancing*."

"We should all dance," Lucinda said. "Dance to the spirit within us."

She got up and crossed to Sammy, and began to hop around the room in an approximation of his steps, blonde hair billowing around her head, looking like some amok go-go dancer. Sammy ignored her, as he almost always ignored all of us.

"Popo the puppet," I said.

"What?" Handley asked.

"Can do anything," I said. "When somebody else pulls the strings."

He stared at me, puzzled.

"A song," I said.

"Oh," he said finally. He looked at the cards he still held in his hand, then threw them down on the table.

"Excuse me," he said, "I have to find the captain."

He got up and rushed out of the lounge, giving the dancers a wide berth.

I sat there, listening to the singing in my head, trying to decide whether it was the same song over and over again or whether it just sounded that way. Angels or auditory disturbance, whatever it was, it didn't really sustain my interest.

OUTBREAK OF ALIEN MUZAK ON STARSHIP, I thought. Details at eleven.

Actually, due to technical constraints, I was unable to file regular bulletins on our progress — would not, in fact, be called upon to deliver the story until our return. Faster-than-light communications had not been revealed by the Signal, or at least not yet deduced from it. Until now this had been something of a blessing, since I would have been hard-pressed to maintain reader interest. Now things were becoming rather more interesting than I might have liked.

"Maybe," I said to Heintzmann, "the aliens are doing this to please Lucinda."

Heintzmann shook his head in bewilderment.

"This is all very strange," he said. "This is not what I expected at all."

"What did you expect?" I asked. "Air Japan?"

Heintzmann was executive vice president of one of the five largest

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companies in North America. His passage on the ship had been paid by a syndicate including nearly all the world's significant multinationals, as mine had been by the syndicate of world publishing organizations that had made the highest bid for the rights to cover this voyage. Private enterprise in space, that was how the government had put it, although they had had a more difficult time explaining away Lucinda.

We sat and watched as Lucinda and little Sammy boogied onward to the beat inside all of our heads.

2.

It had all been a terrible embarrassment to our government, the whole business of Sammy Mickelowitz and the alien Signal. You almost couldn't blame them for trying to cover it up; it was just so weird and spooky that it was bound to scare the hell out of people.

It was hard enough, after all, to grasp that there were aliens out there trying to get in touch with us, without having to get your mind around the fact that contact had first been established through the medium of a profoundly retarded six-year-old boy.

The way they tried to tell it, the Signal had been picked up at the Algonquin Radio Observatory up in Canada in a routine SETI scan. They had tracked in on Epsilon Eridani and tuned in on the water hole, the wavelength between hydrogen and hydroxl where everyone had once thought that a signal might come in, and there it was, loud and clear. As simple as that.

Never mind that everyone had given up on SETI years ago: there was just no funding for that sort of thing anymore; it was hard enough supporting serious science. And never mind that they had given up on E. Eridani even before they gave up on SETI. It just so happened that there were a few minutes free on the dish that day, and that some never-say-die SETI buff had dialed it up one more time, just for old time's sake. . . .

I can't say that I wondered about this myself. But some people did. My buddy Dick Nugati, for example, a science stringer for Reuters.

"Hell of a lucky shot," he said, over a beer one day.

I shrugged, and turned the conversation to baseball.

Dick Nugati wondered because he knew science, while I did not. He wondered, but he never did anything about it, because he didn't talk to cranks and I did. And so it was I who ended up telling the world about the truth of the matter.

I claim no special credit for this, by the way. It was only a certain doggedness, along with a blissful ignorance as to what could be scientifically possible, that led me to little Sammy Mickelowitz.

Like many of my colleagues, I had

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been assigned to the alien beat in the weeks following the initial annoucement of the Signal. It was a Big Story, even if no one as yet knew what the hell it meant.

The Signal appeared to be framed in binary numbers, beeping in like some sort of galactic Morse code. And there was one cluster of numbers that repeated itself over and over again, which would ultimately prove to be an algorithm for reading the rest of the message. But for the moment all we knew was that someone, somewhere had something to say to us, and that in time we might figure out what it was.

This was not quite as exciting as spaceships landing on the White House lawn, or threatening us from space with orbital death rays. But most people found it pretty exciting all the same, and there was keen appetite for news about efforts to unlock the Signal's secrets.

I was writing a series of articles about the decoders, that motley crew of computer scientists, cipher experts, crossword puzzle fanatics, mathematical geniuses, and all-purpose eccentrics assembled by the government and its allies to crack the Signal. It was then thought that the Signal might have tremendous strategic value, and a high priority was placed upon decoding it before our rivals. As it happened, the information obtained would have few immediate military applications.

I did not attempt to write about the science behind this enterprise. I left such dull minutiae to the Dick Nugatis of this world. Rather, it was my task to inject a little human interest into these proceedings, to capture the sweep of history in the making.

The decoders were encamped in a former military training camp in New Hampshire, with several hundred million dollars worth of equipment, having the time of their lives.

"Communication," I remember one of the cipher experts telling me, twitching his eyebrows in emphasis. "That's what this whole thing is all about. Learning to communicate better."

He was British, like many of the decoders, with wild thinning hair, steel spectacles, and a thick northern English accent.

"Some would say," I ventured, "that we can't even communicate very well with each other, let alone with aliens."

"Precisely," said the English decoder, eyebrows twitching away vigorously. "That's precisely my point."

I thought this rather thin stuff, but did my best with it, and my articles were widely read. Soon I became the recipient of a string of crank calls, which I handled with as much good humor as I could summon. People claiming to be aliens already resident on Earth, or married to aliens, or living next door to one. People who had

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found the key to the Signal in Revelation or on the back of a cereal box or some other convenient location. People who thought the aliens were gods and people who thought they were demons. And so on.

And then there was Sharon Keach.

"I know the real story about the Signal," she told me, over the phone, one slow afternoon in the newsroom. "If you want to hear it."

I stifled a yawn.

"Sure, " I said. "Why not?"

She did not sound much like a crank. But they don't always do so at first.

She told me that she was a social worker whose duties involved visiting institutions for the mentally retarded. Little Sammy Mickelowitz lived in one of these homes. His mother had been a forty-two-year-old waitress at a diner in Roselle, New Jersey. His father was unknown, perhaps even to his mother, who had borne four other children over the years, all outside of matrimony. Even before the birth, she had been determined to give the child up for adoption, as she had eventually given up all her children.

As it happened, the child had Down's syndrome, and there were no takers other than the state.

Even for a Down's child, the boy was extremely retarded. Although he learned to perform simple manual tasks, and to understand simple instructions, he never talked, not a word. He would scream sometimes, or grunt, but that was it.

When the boy was four, he began to grunt nearly all the time, high grunts and low, coming sometimes one and two at a time and sometimes in intricate and lengthy bursts. The staff thought the boy might be trying to tell them something, but they never could figure out what it was, and they really didn't have the time to puzzle over it.

And so he went on grunting, high and low, day after day and year after year, and no one paid him any attention, not the staff, and certainly not Sharon Keach, who saw the boy only rarely in any case.

Perhaps he would have grunted on unnoticed forever if it had not been for Marsh Powis, a graduate student in psychology with a side interest in mathematics who got a summer job as an attendant in the home. Powis developed a theory about Sammy's grunting.

"He told me about it over coffee one day," Sharon Keach recalled. "He thought that the boy might be making calculations using some kind of mathematical notation he had made up for himself."

Powis had read about *idiots savants*, otherwise desperately retarded individuals who could perform detailed mathematical operations in their heads. Perhaps Sammy was one of them.

Powis taped Sammy's grunts. He transcribed them, assigning binary

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values to the high and low sounds. But he could find no evidence that Sammy was performing calculations. Instead the boy was repeating the same groupings of sounds over and over without end. Assigned numeric values, these sounds yielded only a string of numbers that made no real sense to Powis.

They made some sense, however, to his roommate, who was an astronomy major.

"What's that?" he asked, seeing Powis poring over the numbers. "Star coordinates?"

And indeed, when Powis went to the university library and pulled out the star catalog, he found that the first half of Sammy's numbers described the position of the star Epsilon Eridani in relation to Earth. Tacked on at the end of this string was a second group of numbers whose function for the moment remained obscure.

Well, it was ludicrous, of course. It had to be coincidence, a million-monkeys deal. Or so everyone told him, including his roommate. It was impossible that it could be otherwise. And yet he could not shake the idea loose, that this boy was somehow tuning in to the stars.

His roommate had a second cousin who had a senior position at the Algonquin Radio Observatory in Ontario, which had once been a major center of SETI research. They drove down to see him. The cousin was mildly intrigued, more so when he saw the numbers.

"That could be a microwave frequency," he said immediately, pointing to the second half of the string. "Right in the water hole, 1540 million Hertz."

And yet he resisted the idea. He resisted even when Powis screened his video of little Sammy grunting away. It was just too absurd. Powis and his cousin were pulling an elaborate gag on him.

"We spend thousands of hours and millions of dollars, and there's nobody there, or at least nobody who wants to talk to us. And now they're flagging us through this kid? Come on."

But in the end he agreed to think about it.

He thought about it for some weeks, and he still could not believe it. But neither could he forget it. And finally he checked it out. It was a quiet day at the observatory, and they had just wound up a project ahead of schedule. So he took a few minutes to rerun the old SETI routine. He tracked in on Sammy's coordinates. And of course the Signal did come in.

Naturally he wondered whether the observatory staff might be collaborating with Powis and his cousin to play out their prank, but they denied it vehemently. And so he called up a buddy at Ohio State and persuaded him to check it out. And the buddy at Ohio State called his buddy at Mount Shasta. And eventually every-

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one agreed that there was indeed a signal. The Signal.

The government got in the act then. They would probably have liked to suppress the whole affair, except that too many people knew about the Signal already. What they could do, however, was try and keep little Sammy Mickelowitz out of the picture.

"They came and took him away," Sharon Keach told me. "Three FBI agents for one little boy. I was there the following week, and the staff was still talking about it. No one knew why they wanted Sammy, not even the director of the home, except that it was a matter of national security."

They had taken him away on the very day that the government announced the Signal. The staff at the home didn't connect the two events. Sharon Keach, however, remembered Marsh Powis and his strange theory about little Sammy.

Powis was no longer working at the home. He had quit the day before they took Sammy away. She found his address and called him at home. He was evasive.

"I gave up on that," he told her. "It was all just a coincidence, a meaningless string of numbers that appeared to mean something."

"But what about this Signal?" she had asked.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Exciting stuff, huh?"

He denied any connection between little Sammy and the Signal, and brought the conversation to an end. She thought that he sounded strained, as though someone might be listening in on their conversation.

The next day she was visited by two FBI agents. They told her that her speculations were without foundation. At the same time, they strongly cautioned her about airing them in public.

She had since kept her peace for several weeks, but could do so no longer.

"Because of little Sammy," she said. "I want to make sure he's all right. And because I think people should know the truth."

I met her afterward, and she was much as I imagined her to be from her voice on the telephone: middle-aged, single, a little dowdy, intensely serious. Excellent casting, really, for the sort of person who would defy the FBI, although in the subsequent TV movie they made her considerably younger and more glamorous.

But for now she was just a voice on the other end of the line on a slow afternoon, telling me a very wild story. Wild, and yet with a certain internal consistency. And she still didn't sound like a crank.

And so I checked her out, and she was who she claimed to be. I checked out the home where little Sammy had lived the first six years of his life. I tracked down Marsh Powis, who refused to speak to me. I found his roommate, who denied the whole

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thing with great vehemence. He even denied that he had a relative working at the Algonquin Radio Observatory, which was silly because of course he did.

The cousin refused to be interviewed. But there were others on the staff who were willing to talk about the two young Americans who had come to visit with their strange story and even stranger request. The RCMP had told them not to, but they did anyway.

It was all very circumstantial, but I wrote it up anyway. WHATEVER HAPPENED TO LITTLE SAMMY? And the shit, of course, hit the fan.

Eventually the government was forced to produce little Sammy, although the subsequent press conference was a great disappointment. Not only did Sammy not talk, he didn't even grunt anymore, not in any meaningful way. He had stopped on the very day that we first tuned in to the Signal.

The scientists, incidentally, were terribly upset about this. It was bad enough not being able to explain just how aliens had been able to send a message across eleven light-years of space into the mind of a retarded child — let alone *why* they would chose such a peculiarly inefficient form of communication. What was even worse, though, for them was attempting to conceive of how the aliens could have known when to stop sending that message to little Sammy. It defied explanation, at least within the bounds of human understanding of physical phenomena.

In the end, of course, it did not defy explanation within the bounds of alien knowledge. The Signal, once decoded, proved to be a veritable cornucopia of information. Even decoded, we did not understand all the information we had received so far, or even half of it. But what we did understand was plenty. Enough to turn all our mathematics and physics upside down, and then sideways-over again. Enough to make possible — although so far not replicable — the kind of instantaneous telepathic link that the aliens had established with little Sammy.

There was enough, too, to build a working space drive to track the Signal to its source, if that was what we wanted to do. As in the end we did.

The story of little Sammy made my career, such as it was. And now it had brought me to this ship to write the concluding chapters, as it had brought Sammy, too.

If little Sammy was no longer in communication with the aliens, why did we bring him along? Because he had once been their chosen vessel, and might become so again. Because he was our talisman, our lucky silver dollar. And because Lucinda's church insisted upon it. In the pantheon of the Church of the Alien, little Sammy was the first and greatest of their saints.

I mused on all this as the singing

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continued to echo in my head, repeated variations on the same theme.

Perhaps I should have hung up on Sharon Keach.

3.

A meeting was called the next morning to discuss the singing, which had not abated.

Captain Webster addressed us first. A career air force officer, heavy-set and slightly graying, normally he looked the part of our fearless leader, with his steely gray eyes and air of decisiveness. Today, however, he wore a bemused, even sheepish, expression.

"As you know," he said, "we've been experiencing some, ah, unusual phenomena. However, Dr. Handley here assures me its nothing to worry about."

He turned the floor over to Handley, who proceeded to snow us with talk of inner-ear imbalances and auditory phenomena and perceptual shifts. It was more or less the same explanation that he had offered me the previous evening, although better rehearsed and more confidently delivered. I scribbled down the bland phrases without pausing to consider them. It was clear that he did not have a clue what was going on.

Having recited this litany, he asked for questions. Theodore Bloom, our mission psychologist, leapt into the breach.

"Have you considered the possibility that this so-called singing may in fact be a form of mass delusion?"

He had indeed considered that possibility. But the fact that the singing had first been heard simultaneously in all parts of the ship, and that all mission members described it in similar terms even without social contagion, indicated that we were dealing with a real, though puzzling, phenomenon.

"You're both missing the point," Lucinda told them. "It's a song of welcome. The Lord Alien is greeting us."

Handley snickered.

"Well, that's an interesting theory, Lucinda," he said. "We'll certainly keep that one in mind."

"Could this, ah, singing be some new form of alien communication?" Bill Hawkes asked.

Officially, Hawkes was one of several diplomatic representatives of our government. Most of us assumed that he was some sort of spy.

Handley deferred to Dmitrov Luria, the senior linguist, on this one.

"We can't rule that out," Luria said. "But so far we have been unable to derive any overt meaning from this singing."

The meeting broke up.

The singing, however, continued.

It was loudest in the morning, when you awoke, and late at night, as you slipped toward sleep, but it was always there, echoing faintly at the

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edge of consciousness.

4.

Do you remember where you were when they announced the Signal?" Lucinda asked me.

We were sitting in the bar at the time. By ship's rules the bar opened nightly for just two hours after evening meal, and neither Lucinda nor I missed a minute of it. Whatever the tenets of her religion, they seemed to place few constraints on alcohol consumption.

I had found myself spending a lot of time with Lucinda, perhaps because we were both outsiders of a kind among the soldiers and scientists and spies and businessmen who made up the crew. I enjoyed her company well enough, as long as she kept off the subject of her religion.

"Vaguely," I said. "A bar, I think. Quite likely a bar."

Yes, a bar. The wide screen TV set playing the Monday Night Football. And then the news flash. Heads turning, a rising buzz of conversation, the sound turned up. . . . Shit, I thought. This is it. World War III. But of course it was nothing so simple.

"Vaguely?" Lucinda asked.

"Well, you know, I'd been drinking a little. And at first I thought it was probably a hoax, Orson Welles producing the football game. Or maybe just a mistake, a false alarm. And even if it was true, it didn't seem terribly exciting. It was all sort of remote, you know. I mean, what did it really mean to me? What possible difference could it make in my own life?"

"Rather a big difference," Lucinda said, indicating our surroundings.

"Later, yes. But at the time it seemed no big deal."

We had just carried on drinking, as I recalled. Then I had gone home and had a fight with Martha. Nothing unusual, the same old stuff.

"We're just not communicating," she had told me. "I just can't seem to get through to you at all."

And I had said something like, "Communicating about what?" I was watching Jack Benny on the late show, or trying to, and I made some crack about Mary Livingstone never asking Jack to communicate. And Martha got angry and said I was trying to make her angry so that she would go away and let me watch TV. And so on.

"For me," Lucinda said, "it was the most exciting thing I had ever heard. Ever. The first time I heard about it, I thought it must be God, speaking to us."

"Through an eleven-year-old radio message?"

"He chose the form of communication that would engage us," she said. "People don't believe in visions anymore, or voices in their heads. We've cut ourselves off from them. And so He revealed Himself to us through our machines. But He also sent us a miracle."

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"Sammy?"

"Yes," she said. "It was when I saw that little boy on the news that I knew for sure. It was a miracle, you see; the whole thing could be only a miracle."

I groaned inwardly.

"A few weeks later," she said, "I saw Judd Mahoney on TV, and he was saying the same thing, exactly the same thing. And I quit my job and I went to join his crusade."

"And you never looked back," I said.

"For me," Lucinda said, "it was the beginning of a whole new epoch."

5.

New ages, new eras. I had seen plenty of them come and go in my time. But there was indeed, for most people, something epochal about the Signal, once the news had finally sunk in. Perhaps not enough to make them sign up for Lucinda's church, but extraordinarily significant all the same. The universe, finally, had answered back.

It took the decoders little more than a year to unlock the secrets of interstellar travel. Strict security was imposed upon this finding, but somehow it leaked out all the same. Quite a number of decoders, you see, had become converted to the new Church of the Alien. They had taken it upon themselves to spread the good news that we would soon be able to call upon God.

The conversion of the decoders, those happy number-juggling servants of reductionist materialism, was something of an embarrassment to the scientific community as a whole. But you could see what had driven them to it. Vertigo, that was what it had to be. Dealing too closely with the powers of infinity. The Church of the Alien, absurd as it was, at least offered you something to hold on to.

Although it was the Church of the Alien that first broached the idea of mounting a voyage to E. Eridani, it was quietly taken up in the boardrooms and newsrooms and in the corridors of official power. There was a good argument, of course, that we should wait until we understood more of the Signal, before racing off to confront the alien. Yet it might have taken many generations to apprehend the Signal in its entirety. And humanity, as a species, might not have that much time.

The government, in the end, had bowed to the immense groundswell of curiosity about the Signal in all segments of the populace and come down on the side of the expedition. At worst, the expedition would be a useful diversion from the more than usually intractable socioeconomic problems that the government faced in the declining days of the second millennium. And at best, perhaps something would actually come of it:

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more new technologies, more alien wisdom, more goodies from the stars.

The aliens, it was thought, could tell us how to avoid nuclear war, how to dispose of radioactive wastes and heal the ravaged environment, how to produce a dazzling array of new consumer products, how to unlock endless supplies of free energy, perhaps even how to become immortal. High hopes, indeed, were placed upon the aliens.

Offered the chance of a berth on this voyage, I could hardly refuse. It could be the story of a lifetime. But even more important, I had always been a voracious traveler, both personally and professionally, as tireless tourist and fearless foreign correspondent.

Only by traveling into new and vast empty places was I able to fully experience my own emptiness, to relish my boredom and dissociation. Only by moving forward relentlessly into unknown lands could I transcend my desire for and horror of the other, for all of that world that lay beyond the prison of my own mind. I traveled to thrill in my own apartness. And to escape, always to escape, myself.

Or so, at least, my analyst had told me, and I had no reason to doubt it.

6.

We were just becoming used to the singing when we saw the monsters.

I was sitting in on the day's seminar, having nothing better to do.

"One cannot really imagine the alien," Bloom said. "The alien, by definition, is the other. Beyond our experience, beyond our imagination."

Coming from our supposed expert on alien psychology, this was, I suppose, rather disheartening news. But I had already lost any expectation of enlightenment from these interminable study sessions. I continued to take notes, but my mind was far away. I wondered whether the Blue Jays had finally made it to the World Series. I wondered what was for lunch. I wondered whom Martha was sleeping with now.

"By definition unimaginable," Bloom said, playing for time as he shuffled through the papers on his lectern, finally giving an exclamation of satisfaction. He leaned forward and began to read.

"Footprints with no toes, the footprints of spirits. And then we saw them, a terrifying sight. Their shirts looked like floppy creased skins they were able to pull off. They spoke a ghostly language, like the drone of a hornet. We fled."

Bloom paused, allowing us time to reflect. Back in college, many of my professors had used this trick, whether to make us reflect or to spin out too-thin material, and Bloom was nothing if not professorial. I felt oppressed by a sense of time rolling back, of being trapped in the class-

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room all over again. It was difficult to believe that we were actually in the world's first starship, hurtling between the geometric planes of the continuum. But perhaps that was the point of these seminars, to distract us from that knowledge, to domesticate the void.

"The Yanomani Indians," Bloom told us, "recalling the coming of the white man."

He crossed to the flip chart and wrote the word "YANOMANI" in bold black letters. No doubt he was used to flip charts, as a veteran of corporate and government consulting assignments, yet he still wore an expression of faint disdain, as though he would have much preferred a blackboard.

"Similarly," he said, "other primitive peoples who perceived airplanes as birds, complete with feathers on their wings. What is it that we can learn from such accounts?"

He looked around the table for volunteers. Vera Langley raised her hand.

"We learn," she said, "how very difficult it is to see clearly what one has never seen before. The tendency, inevitably, is to distort the novel stimulus to fit our existing frame of reference."

Vera Langley was Hawkes's assistant, or possibly his boss — it was difficult to say, so mysterious were their State Department job titles. A statuesque brunette in her late thirties, she was clearly the smarter of the two.

"Precisely," Bloom said, and Langley looked smug. If she had had pigtails, someone would probably have dipped them in an inkwell. If we had any inkwells.

"In confronting the alien," Bloom said, "at best our perceptions may be as inadequate as those of the Yanomani. And at worst we may fail to perceive at all. The Fuegians, after all, did not even notice the *Beagle* at first. It was so alien an object as to be utterly meaningless to them."

"But you are speaking of primitives," said Lynn Grant, our supposed expert in alien biology, seeing the bait and rising toward it. "We would hardly fall into the same category."

"Yet your own intellectual ancestors," Bloom said, "not primitives but the most cultured and sophisticated members of their society, made a similar error. Poring over the first microscopes, they described fantastic creatures swarming in the eye of the lens. Just as twentieth-century astronomers detected canals on Mars."

"Yet as scientists," Grant said, "we can develop and test hypotheses, in order to move progressively closer to the truth of the matter. We *can* imagine the alien. We already have."

She waved her hand toward the gallery of artists' impressions of alien beings, pinned along one wall of the conference room. They were left over from her own seminar the day before,

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on exobiology, during which I had actually dozed off in the middle of a heated debate between Grant and our engineer, Morgan, on the feasibility of silcone-based life cycles.

Some of these illustrations had been specially commissioned in preparation for our little jaunt, while others depicted famous fiction aliens. From a distance it was hard to distinguish between the two, although I recognized H. G. Wells's Martians, perched in their war machines.

"Hypotheses," Grant insisted. "Some outlandish, no doubt, yet capable of verification or falsification."

"Useless," Bloom said, "and perhaps actually dangerous."

And so they went at it, hammer and tongs, while my stomach began to rumble.

Initially, these seminars had seemed a useful way of filling the lengthy but unknown period of inactivity that would, for most of us, characterize this voyage. But already they were becoming wearisome, and I was not sure how much more of them I would be able to take.

It was thought that our trip would last no more than a few weeks, but the Signal had been somewhat vague on this point, as on so many others. There was an outside chance, in fact, that our journey would never end. We might spend our entire lifetimes in seminars like this one, circling around and around the same issues, guided by experts who were by definition, as Bloom might have put it, ignorant of their subjects.

"Science fiction writers do," Morgan was saying.

"Do what?" Bloom asked.

"Imagine the alien. All the time. Think of Heinlein, Niven. . . ."

Bloom waved his hand in dismissal.

"They imagine nothing that does not already exist in their own minds. How could it be otherwise? They proceed by analogy, blurring and distorting known categories of living creatures. Or else they draw upon thinly veiled folk imagery of angels and demons and fairies. We can learn nothing from such writing. Nothing." He thumped the lectern in emphasis. "Nothing except the danger of reducing the alien to metaphor."

In truth, Bloom had a point. One really could not imagine the alien. Certainly it was impossible to do so on the basis of our slim understanding of the Signal, which had in any case showed us only that side of the alien that they had chosen to reveal, or were able to reveal through the medium of binary digits. We were dealing with only a tiny fraction of the alien, like the blind man and the elephant. And the part we had glimpsed was both enormously enigmatic and vastly superior.

They were cool ones, these aliens. They gave us so much and yet so little. They manifested themselves to us as pure intelligence, piling detail after detail upon us, instruction upon in-

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struction, relentlessly and without passion. Some suspected, in fact, that they were not really living at all, that they were some form of machine intelligence, an evolutionary step beyond organic life.

And yet there was, some of the decoders insisted, a kind of life to the Signal, a strange kind of frozen lyricism in its unlocking of the mysteries of space and time. There was life, perhaps, but there was no warmth at all.

"You know," said Phil Heintzmann, "I think these aliens are going to be much like us in at least one way."

"What way is that?" I asked, feeding him his cue.

"I think it's obvious they want to do business. Why else send the Signal?"

"We don't really know that," Hawkes said. "We don't really know what they want."

"Yes," Langley said. "For example, it could be that they're testing us. Testing our level of technological development."

"Testing us for what?" Heintzmann asked.

"Membership in the galactic federation," I said. "Isn't that right, Vera?"

"There are various scenarios," she said. "They may be testing us so that they can crush us before we advance too far."

"Such paranoia," sneered Dmitrov Luria. "The paranoia of a decadent society."

Luria was the token Soviet representative on our mission. The Soviets had eventually decoded the Signal, too, but, given an economic situation even more deteriorated than our own, they had decided against mounting their own expedition. Instead they had bought into ours, purely out of scientific interest, of course. Luria was a talented linguist, but no one doubted that he was also KGB.

"Poor Dmitrov," Hawkes sneered back. "I'm afraid you're in for a bit of a shock."

"It is you who will be shocked," Luria said, "by your encounter with a truly advanced society."

Luria was parroting the official Soviet line, that the aliens would prove to be communistic in their social organization. For the Soviets it was axiomatic, the logical extension of dialectical materialism. A truly advanced society could take no other form. I don't know whether Luria really believed this, but he did enjoy needling Hawkes. And vice versa.

"If they don't want us to advance," Morgan asked, "why send us the necessary information to build a space drive? Why make it possible for us to come to them when they could come to us?"

"Maybe they don't like to travel," I said. "Or maybe they're cannibals, and this is their way of sending out for lunch."

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"You don't *really* think that, do you, George?" Bloom asked, fixing me with his watery blue eyes.

"Oh, I don't think much of anything," I said. "Don't mind me, I'm only the recording angel."

"In that case," Bloom said, "perhaps you could practice what you preach, and let us get on with our discussion. . . ."

But we were spared that. There was a throat-clearing noise over the intercom, and then we heard Captain Webster's familiar gravelly voice. Familiar, but with a strange edge to it. I immediately sat up to take notice.

"Ah, Dr. Handley," he said. "Sorry to interrupt, but I'd appreciate it if you could join me on the bridge." There was a pause. "And perhaps you could bring Dr. Grant and Dr. Bloom with you, too."

The rest of us sat watching as this odd trio scurried off to obey their summons. Hawkes exchanged glances with Langley, and she nodded slightly. He rose and followed them.

"What the hell," Heintzmann wondered aloud, "is going on?"

It was then that Sammy danced into the room. I later learned that he come directly from the bridge. Except for the drive room, he pretty much had the run of the ship. Even Webster was a little afraid of the boy who had once spoken for the aliens.

Sammy looked unusually agitated. If he had been a normal child, you might have said he was excited.

"What's up, Sammy?" I asked, not expecting an answer because of course Sammy didn't talk, not one word, had never talked in his life. Except that this time he did.

"Monsters," he said, quite distinctly. He danced on the spot, flinging his arms out wide. "Monsters."

7.

Rumors buzzed around the ship for hours. Bloom was seen returning from the bridge, looking pale and refusing any comment prior to shutting himself away in his quarters; then Grant, walking as though in a dream.

In the end they let us all up to the bridge in twos and threes to take a look. It was something they could hardly expect to keep a secret for long. And maybe they thought we might have some useful suggestions to offer, although on this score they would be disappointed. Even Lucinda, who accompanied me and Phil Heintzmann to see the sights, seemed at a temporary loss for words.

"There," Webster said, pointing at the viewscreen.

When I had visited the bridge a few days before, the screen had showed only the face of midspace, that strange medium through which we traveled, visible to us only as a flux of swirling shapes and colors, a fast-shifting formlessness. Now the screen showed a different, and altogether more disturbing, aspect.

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Monsters. Snakes and bats, lizards and rats, great white slugs and horrible oozing fungi, all kinds of monsters, rushing at the ship. Monsters with mouths open and jaws gnashing, wings beating and tentacles writhing, monsters who flew and monsters who slithered, every kind of monster you could imagine, and then some.

Instinctively, I flinched back from this horror show.

"Don't worry," Webster said, "they can't get in. At least, we don't think so."

"You don't think so?" Heintzmann echoed. "Surely you don't think those things actually exist? How would that be possible? I mean, monsters in space. . . ."

"We're not *in* space," Webster reminded him, "or in time, either. We're in midspace, and maybe those creatures are, too. Who the hell knows? But the chances are pretty good that they don't exist. Certainly not in the form we're seeing them, and probably not in any form.

So that was the good news, that we were probably hallucinating. The bad news was that perhaps we weren't. The fact of the matter was that no one really knew enough about midspace to say for sure, no one human, anyway. While in midspace, we were much like the Grand Old York, neither up nor down, and anything, finally, was possible.

"Could someone go outside," I asked Webster, "to take a closer look?"

"Someone?" Webster said. "Are you volunteering, Newton? That's impossible anyway. There's no exit from this ship while we're in midspace."

"But what the hell does it mean?" Heintzmann asked.

"It's a test," Lucinda said, suddenly reaching a decision. "It's God manifesting Himself to test our strength of purpose. To see if we dare to seek him even through adversity. If we persist, His creatures will lead us to Him."

"We know the way, Lucinda," Webster said irritably. "It was all in the Signal. And we have absolutely no intention of turning back."

He glared at the screen, as though daring the monsters outside to invade his domain.

8.

Attempts were made, of course, to explain the monsters.

"Presumably," Handley said, "like the singing, these hallucinations are some unforeseen psychological impact of traveling through midspace. Perhaps there is some plastic quality to midspace, one that gives shape to our own thoughts."

"But why this particular hallucination?" Bloom asked. "This comic-book catalog of bestiality?"

"Maybe someone is trying to scare us off," Langley said. "Maybe this is deliberate alien interference with our minds, making us project our

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most deeply held fears."

"But with whose mind?" Bloom asked. "Mine? Yours? All of our minds? Or. . . ."

"Or what?" I asked.

"Or the mind of a child," Bloom said. "A dim, terrified child, touched by something extraordinarily powerful and impossibly strange."

Heads swiveled toward little Sammy.

"You think that little Sammy is causing the monsters?" I asked.

"I throw it out as a possibility," Bloom said. "Certainly something is happening to Sammy. Do you not see the change in him?"

Sammy had been sitting perched on the conference table next to Lucinda, but as usual no one had been paying him any attention until now. Now I noted that he was looking directly at Bloom, as if keenly interested in our discussions.

"He spoke yesterday," Lucinda said. "When he came here from the bridge. He said, 'monsters.' I never heard him speak before."

"He does seem more alert somehow," Handley said, "more aware of his environment."

"He is being healed," Lucinda said, "by the music of the Lord."

"He's not sick, Lucinda," Handley pointed out. "Just retarded. And yet I suppose it's possible that the midspace field is affecting him in some way, speeding up the transmission of neural impulses. . . ."

"Or Lucinda may be right in a way," Bloom said. "The singing could be producing the excitation."

"Then we would all be getting smarter," I pointed out.

Certainly I had noticed no such effect. My own thoughts were fuzzier than ever. After viewing the monsters the day before, I had slept poorly, and was feeling tired and irritable. And of course the singing went on and on.

"The effect could be uneven," Bloom said. "Particularly so if this singing is the aliens' method of establishing contact with Sammy. What we hear ourselves may be only the oversplash."

"No such aural effects were reported by staff in the home," Handley said.

"True," Bloom said. "But the effect may be much stronger as we approach their home world."

"This is all extremely speculative," Handley said. "You really don't have any evidence to support it."

"There are the monsters," Bloom said. "I believe that the monsters belong to Sammy, that they are his way of expressing his fear of these aliens."

He turned to Sammy.

"Did you feel them?" Bloom asked him. "Did they touch your mind again?"

Sammy stared back at him, unblinking.

"Tell us."

"Snakes," Sammy said suddenly. "Bats." The words were a little slurred,

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a little halting, and yet their meaning was clear. "Dragons. Worms. Rats. Monsters."

9.

After writing up my notes, I went in search of Lucinda.

I found her playing Ping-Pong with Heintzmann in the game room. He was going down to defeat upon defeat, increasingly red-faced yet smiling all the way.

"You know," he said, finally laying down his paddle in defeat and gasping for breath, "I was on one of the first Chinese trade missions, sold them ten megabucks of farm machinery. How I got my career in gear. Those guys, they could really play Ping-Pong. But bargain? Like babes in the wood."

"You think these aliens are going to be like the Chinese?" I asked.

"In a way," he said. "You see, for me, the Chinese *were* aliens. But that didn't stop us from cutting a deal. It doesn't matter how different you are, you see. You can still do business together, as long as I've got something you need and you've got something I need."

"Yes," I said. "But what could these aliens need from us?"

"They want something," he said. "It's up to me to find out what it is."

Normally I found Heintzmann amusing, but now he was getting on my nerves. I had not been able to get Sammy's performance out of my mind. Snakes, I thought. Rats. Maybe Heintzmann could find something to sell them.

I was relieved when he left.

"You want to play?" Lucinda asked, still holding her paddle.

I declined, and we went over to the bar. This being before evening meal, we had to settle for soft drinks.

"So," I asked, "do you think he's going to take these aliens to the cleaners?"

"If there were a deal to be made, I suppose he would be the one to make it. But that isn't what the aliens have in mind."

"You really don't know what the aliens have in mind," I said.

"I know what I believe," she said.

"Maybe I wish I believed it, too," I said, surprising myself.

I looked at my hand gripping my can of Coke. The hand was shaking. Lucinda looked at it, too.

"Are you scared, George?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Isn't everyone? I mean, going to meet *aliens*. Singing in my ears. Hallucinatory monsters. Who wouldn't be scared?"

"You wouldn't be if you had faith."

"Maybe so," I said. "I wouldn't mind having some faith that this was all going to work out. Not your faith, necessarily. Any one would do. Even Heintzmann's. A salesman's faith is better than none."

"And what are you?" she asked, irritated. "You're a salesman, too. You

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and Phil, you're both traders, buying and selling pieces of the alien."

"Whereas you just want to worship it," I said.

"You can be defensive with me," Lucinda said. "But you can't defend yourself from the Lord. I'm afraid that when we get to where we're going, you're going to have a terrible surprise."

"Likewise," I said.

And yet for one awful moment, I considered the possibility that Lucinda would prove to be right after all. The thought filled me with dread. Even Luria's communist aliens, however sanctimonious, would be better than angels.

"I need a drink," I said.

"So do I," she said.

We stared at each other for a moment. Perhaps, I thought, she was more scared than she liked to admit. Or perhaps she just wanted a drink.

"I have a bottle in my room," she said.

I raised my eyebrows. My own few belongings had been thoroughly searched to remove such contraband.

"Strictly for ceremonial purposes, of course," she said.

It was just as well that Lucinda would not be called upon to perform any ceremonies, since we quickly ran through her stock. Somehow we forgot to go for dinner afterward. We even forgot about going to the bar.

Covering war sharpens the reflexes. So it was that I woke up in the middle of the night, while Lucinda slept on beside me in her narrow bed. Someone was in her room.

"Who's there?" I asked, sitting up and groping for the light switch.

"Lucinda," said a voice from the darkness, a strange yet oddly familiar voice.

And then the lights came on and I was looking at little Sammy, standing there in his pajamas.

"What?" Lucinda said, sitting up beside me.

Sammy looked from me to Lucinda, and then back to me, as though trying to make sense of the scene. Then he turned back to Lucinda.

"Lucinda," he said again. "Voices."

"Voices," he said. "Head."

He pointed to his head.

Lucinda got out of bed and put on her dressing gown. She crossed to Sammy and put her arm around him.

"You hear voices, Sammy?" she said. "Voices in your head?"

"Yes."

"Saying what, Sammy? Saying what?"

"Home," the boy said. "Go home."

10.

We sat around the conference table yet again, listening to Sammy. He had retrieved a few more words from his head, but basically it came down to what he had told Lucinda. The aliens appeared to want us to go home.

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"You must," Sammy said. "Go home now. You must."

"This is ludicrous," Hawkes said. "What can this boy tell us?"

"He told us plenty before," Handley reminded him. "He told us where to find the Signal."

"I don't accept it," Hawkes said. "Even if the aliens are telling us to go home, I don't accept it. It's insulting. It's. . . ." He seemed at a loss for words.

"Unacceptable?" I suggested.

"We must go forward," Hawkes said. "We must reach our destination."

"Actually," Webster said, "we have."

We looked toward him, startled.

"When?" I asked.

"We emerged from midspace around 0300 hours," Webster said. "We have visual contact with a yellow dwarf star that our navigational computer confirms to be Epsilon Eridani, and with a number of orbital bodies that appear to be planets. We believe that we have tracked the Signal to the second planet of this star system."

"Estimated time of arrival?" Hawkes asked.

"Two days."

There was a silence as we absorbed this information. Finally, Lucinda broke the silence.

"We must go home," she said. She looked pale, stricken. "We must hear His word. We are not ready to look on His face. But at least He gave us His music."

It was then that I realized that the singing had stopped, and yet I couldn't recall when. Surely it had still been with us the night before?

"Oh, come on, Lucinda," Hawkes said. "The singing was just part of their bag of tricks, something to disorient us. Classic psychological warfare stuff. Then they stepped up the pressure with the monsters. Now that they've seen that we're not going to turn and run, they're trying to warn us off directly."

"What do you think, Dr. Bloom?" Webster asked our psychologist, who was looking more than usually subdued.

Bloom shook his head.

"I prefer my own interpretation of events," Bloom said. "Not that it really matters. Whatever they were attempting to accomplish before, I think these aliens have now made themselves perfectly clear."

"The monsters," I said. "What happened to the monsters?"

"We have lost visual contact," Webster said.

"Home," Sammy said again. "Go home."

A lengthy discussion followed. The civilian members of the crew favored turning around and going home. The scientists were torn between their caution and their lust to map and categorize and subdue the unknown.

But we were not a democracy in

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any case, and Webster, not surprisingly, came down on the side of Hawkes and Langley. So did Luria, for that matter.

"But if they don't want to see us," I said, "what's the point?"

"We have a responsibility to discharge our mission," Webster told me, "whatever the possible risks."

"We must know," Hawkes said. "We must know who they are and what their capabilities are. We must be prepared to deal with whatever threat they present."

"Besides," Langley said. "We may have nothing to fear. They may be utterly defenseless. They may be afraid of *us*."

"Now," Sammy said. "Go home now."

11.

And so we traveled toward the alien planet. The viewscreens showed no monsters, only the banal face of normal space. There was no more singing. And once we had taken the decision to proceed, Sammy ceased his urgings.

It was almost as if the aliens were resigned to our visitation.

"I'm afraid we're making a big mistake," I told Lucinda.

"Worse than a mistake," she said. "A blasphemy."

We comforted each other as best we could.

Bloom was not happy either.

"We seek the alien," he told me, over a morose luncheon one day. "And yet we find only ourselves. What can they think of us? What can we think of ourselves?"

Heintzmann fretted, too.

"I hope we're not going to get off on the wrong foot with these people," he told me. "We don't want to appear too pushy. But if we could just get an opening. . . ."

"Like we did with Japan?" I asked.

Heintzmann brightened. "That's right," he said. "We forced them to open up to the world, didn't we? A few hundred years back."

"With gunboats," I said.

"Well, obviously I hope that won't be necessary."

"Actually," I said, "it may not even be possible."

12.

The alien world as revealed through our scanning was . . . well, it was *alien*, certainly, with funny-shaped landmasses and vast patches of brownish-looking vegetation. No lights bloomed by night, and yet there was considerable evidence of artificial construction, and the airwaves were alive with information.

It was alien, but our probes revealed that it was also in many ways quite Earth-like, so that we would be able to survive there with some degree of comfort. As in fact we survive now.

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We attempted to make contact with the aliens, but there was no response. Perhaps, I thought, they were sulking.

Webster took Hawkes and Handley and a few of the military personnel down in a smaller craft, since the mother ship itself was not designed to enter a planetary gravity field. We monitored his progress as he kept up a running commentary, describing the small, scattered alien constructions, the bizarre vegetation. And then, a few minutes before touchdown, all communication ceased.

At the same moment, all but the most basic life-support systems on our ship failed, too, as did all efforts to reinstate them. Even if we wanted to turn and run, Morgan told us, we would be unable to do so.

And so we waited. We waited several days. And at last they came for us.

They came in our own vesel, with Webster piloting. As we learned later, they had never had any use for such devices themselves.

"Jesus," I said as they entered the ship. "Bats."

"Megabats, actually," Grant said.

At the time I thought she was referring to their size. And indeed, they were very big, nearly as tall as we are, and with great folded wings that must have spanned twelve feet across. Later, Grant explained to me the difference between the megabats, like flying foxes, and the more common microbats. Although taxonomists had lumped them together for centuries, there had always been some argument as to whether the megabats should actually be classed with the primates.

Perhaps there was some real similarity between these aliens and our own megabats, and perhaps not. I can say only that they appeared batlike to me, and for the rest I must yield to Bloom.

Lucinda was excited by their wings. But they were no angels, these aliens. No demons either, for that matter.

Little Sammy was terrified by them, crouching behind us and whimpering to himself, although later he would overcome his fears.

The aliens were clothed in a thin glistening film, which Webster explained was a protective covering, necessary until they could decontaminate us.

"Where are the others?" I asked Webster.

"Down there," he said. "And you have to come, too."

"They're holding them hostage?"

Webster scowled.

"We don't have any choices here," he said. "We have to go with them."

And so they took us down to join the rest of our party.

13.

"You should not have come," the alien told us.

We were assembled in a shelter

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the aliens had hastily fabricated for us. Having no stairs or elevators, no internal illumination — they could see in the dark — and many steep drops, their buildings were quite unsuitable for us. Later they would build us more spacious accommodations.

"You were mistaken," the alien said. "If we had wanted you to come, we would have said so."

It was not the leader of the aliens, this one — if in fact they had a leader; their political organization was opaque to us, and they did not bother to explain it. It was simply an alien who had bothered to learn our language.

The alien was polite enough, but it was clear it held us in contempt.

"We warned you not to come," the alien said. "We expended considerable effort to do so. And yet you did not listen."

"Then why send the Signal?" Heintzmann asked. "If you didn't want us to come?"

"You could have sent us your own message," the alien said. "That was all we expected. That was all we wanted."

"Then why didn't you say so?" Hawkes asked.

"Quite frankly," the alien said, "the idea of a species wishing to travel through space did not occur to us. Certainly we have never been interested in doing so. Neither have other life-forms with whom we have exchanged information in the past. The situation had never arisen. Your behavior is extremely eccentric, not to mention unfortunate."

"Why," I asked, indicating little Sammy, "did you first establish contact with this boy?"

It was one of the questions I had journeyed this great distance to ask, but the answer was less than satisfying.

"Because he could listen," the alien said.

"How?" Handley asked, leaning forward intently. "By what mechanism? Please explain. You have much to teach us."

"We are not teachers," the alien said. "We are not gods. We are not soldiers. We are not merchants. We seek only information."

"To what purpose?" Handley asked.

"To no purpose," the alien said. It paused. "It pleases us. We enjoy it." It seemed to be searching for the right words in our language, and not finding them.

"Matter decays," it said finally. "Energy decays. Information survives."

"And we have plenty," Heintzmann said. "Processes, products, styles, fashions. . . ."

The alien waved a limb in dismissal, in an oddly humanlike gesture.

"We have accessed your information stores," it said. "We have been pleased to a certain degree, but we desire no further information."

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"There are other societies on our planet," Luria said, "other cultures. More advanced. . . ."

"We have sufficient information," the alien said.

"Then let us go home," Heintzmann said. "We can take a hint."

"You were warned not to come," the alien told us, "but you came, and now you must stay."

"They'll come and rescue us," Hawkes said. "They'll come with a fleet."

"We do not assess that as likely," the alien said. "Given the commitment of resources necessary to construct even one such vessel, and the disappearance of your own mission, we forsee no repetition. Certainly nothing on the scale you suggest. On the other hand, given our understanding of your makeup, we believe that sending you home might exacerbate the possibility of further adventurism."

"You may be content to stay on your own little planet," Webster said — in a burst of unexpected, although surely well-rehearsed, eloquence — "but humans never will. Whether you intended to or not, you've given us the stars. And we're going to take them."

"You are clever with machines," the alien said. "But quite frankly, we do not forsee the prolonged survival of your species. Of course we will monitor the situation and take whatever steps are necessary."

"But you could help us," Handley said. "Help us end our wars. Show us how to pull through."

"You are quite wrong," the alien said. "You are making the same mistake that brought you here in the first place, seeking solutions for problems that only you can solve, if indeed they are capable of solution at all. There is absolutely nothing we can do for you, not that we wish to do anything in any case."

"You are misjudging us," Webster said. "You're underestimating us."

"No," the alien said. "We're not."

14.

And so these days I live, like my former traveling companions, in my very own 1950s Airstream trailer. Or rather, a replica of a 1950s Airstream trailer.

The aliens could have replicated any Earthly dwelling contained within our ship's information stores, from a log cabin to the Palace of Versailles, without raising a significant sweat. But they decided to make us trailers. Airstream trailers.

Perhaps you've seen one. From the outside — and I think this may have appealed to their sense of humor, if they have one — it looks like a spaceship, a sleek aluminum spaceship with portholes for windows. Inside is a 1950s living room, with wood paneling, big overstuffed furniture and lace curtains, a TV console

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playing nothing but reruns of "I Love Lucy" — presumably they taped it for us out of the ether — a two burner stove, and an adjoining bathroom with shower.

I'm used to it by now, although at first I thought it was weird. But the aliens loved it, as much as they're capable of loving anything.

"Classic Americana," they told us. "The original Byam design."

The aliens had gained access to a cross section through the history, culture, arts, and sciences of Earth. For the most part, they had not been much impressed. But they had a thing about Wallace Merle Byam, the designer of the Airstream trailer. They thought he was one of Earth's great innovators. I have never even heard of him.

"Think of it," the aliens said. "A mass-produced home on wheels. Streamlined design, aerodynamically styled. So light it could be pulled by a man on a bicycle."

"I don't have a bicycle," I said.

"A traditional interior within a futuristic exterior. Uniting inside and outside, nature and culture."

Oh, they are certainly strange ones, these aliens. Although I suppose that's only to be expected. All in all, they've been quite good about the whole thing. I doubt that we would have taken so much trouble.

"A zoo," Hawkes said. "They're building us a frigging zoo."

But if we are indeed on exhibit, we are anything but a popular attraction. We see the aliens flying overhead sometimes, and they come if we ask them to, but otherwise they leave us pretty much alone.

And so we live here, in our little trailer camp, and we pass the time as best we can. I'm even beginning to like bridge, although Lucinda is as terrible at it as ever.

For the first few months, Lucinda was very depressed, but lately she has been coming out of it.

"You know something?" she told me the other day. "Maybe it all worked out for the best. Maybe I was *supposed* to come here, to show these aliens the way."

"Which way is that, Lucinda?" I asked her.

Today I saw little Sammy flying by. He's very pleased with his wings. I don't know if I would like them much myself, but so far the question has not come up. Only Sammy was favored with the deal, no doubt in payment for past services, and these days he hangs out mostly with the aliens, swooping from ledge to ledge in their great darkened palaces. I suppose they must have fixed him up with infrared vision somehow, too.

Bloom is moving out soon, to see more of this alien world. He has persuaded the aliens to build him a car to pull his trailer. He is a clever one, that Bloom. He read up on Byam's latter-day caravans, and talked the aliens into letting him stage a rerun. Apparently, Byam would lead groups

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of trailers on extended trips through Canada, Mexico, Europe, even Africa. Imagine it, a hundred or more of these amazing capsules pulled by those giant old American automobiles, rushing through the African bush. At night, Bloom tells me, they would pull the trailers into a circle, and sit around a campfire singing songs, or square dancing.

Some of the other scientists are going along, too, as well as that odd couple, Langley and Luria. I don't know if they plan to do any square dancing, but I imagine they'll squeeze in a little spying, just in case they should ever be in a position to file a report. Old habits die hard, after all, although not all of them, and Hawkes had been in a terrible sulk since Vera hooked up with the opposition.

Bloom tried to sign me up as well, but for the moment I think I'll stay put. I've had enough traveling for a while. And besides, Lucinda is six months pregnant. At first we were worried about what the aliens would think about that, but they seemed quite unconcerned. Less concerned than I, actually.

I have requested permission to transmit my account of our voyage back to my sponsors back on Earth. The aliens, however, have not been encouraging on this score, and in a sense I suppose I am relieved. It would be difficult, after all, to tell this story while still retaining some shred of dignity for our species.

And yet perhaps something can be salvaged from this venture all the same. You see, I have a vision. One day, I think, we will return. Not us, of course, and perhaps not even our children, but our grandchildren or their own children. Ultimately, I believe, the aliens could be persuaded.

They will drop out of the sky, these descendants of ours, in great white ships. The ships, I think, should be saucer-shaped, as so long expected, affirming the wholeness of being, denying by their very presence the reality of our desperate fragmentedness.

Perhaps they will have wings, our descendants, like little Sammy. Certainly they will be tall and godlike.

"We are aliens," they will say, and by then it will be no less than the truth of the matter.

"We have come from the stars," they will say, "to save you from yourselves."

I believe they would be eagerly received.

I only hope they will not be too late.

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Donald Burleson is a professor of mathematics at Rivier College in New Hampshire. His stories have appeared in Twilight Zone, *and he is the author of a book and numerous articles on H. P. Lovecraft. This is his first story for F&SF, and you will not want to read it in a dentist's waiting room . . .*

Family Dentistry

BY
DONALD R. BURLESON

Owen Tyler couldn't even have told you why he turned down this of all streets, a forlorn-looking little untrafficked crevice between two cheerless stretches of old red brick buildings in which, at first, there seemed to be no sign of life. The street, which was unmarked — perhaps, he idly mused, too forgettable to merit a name? — ran its dusty and grimy length, its old flagstoning festering through the asphalt in spots, between North Main, where he had been walking before he turned off, and Elm Street, he thought it was, shining a block away at the other end like a reemergence into relatively wholesome air and light. The buildings on either side seemed to consist of a jumble of boarded-up or broken or whitewash-smeared shop windows, overlooked by similarly untenanted-looking and dismal panes staring blankly and mindlessly out from what must once have been seedy and no doubt roach-infested apartments higher up. Utter desertion and desolation, this scene — until he reached the place on the left about halfway down.

MAURICE GUEULE, D.D.S. — FAMILY DENTISTRY, the dilapidated sign proclaimed beside the door. At first he thought it just another abandoned enterprise, but he glimpsed a feeble light from behind the dirty but unbroken window to the right of the sign. God — what an appetizing place to have your mouth worked on.

He stood looking at the door; there was no one else on the sidewalk, no one else in sight on the street at all. On both sides of him at some remove, the traffic on the main streets sounded distant and unconcerned. The dentist must do a lively business in *this* neigh-

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borhood, he thought. But then his thoughts turned to the past, to some six months ago, back in Syracuse before the company had transferred him here. "Periodontal surgery," his dentist out there had said, after a checkup — "it's that, or pretty soon you're going to start losing your teeth from gradual bone deterioration." Owen knew the nature of the procedure, because a couple of his officemates had had it done — a grisly-sounding affair involving slicing the gums in one quadrant of your mouth at a time, chopping a thin strip away from their edges, flapping them back, scraping a lifetime accumulation of deeply entrenched gunk from the bone, stitching the gums back down, and informing you that corn on the cob was going to be beyond your repertoire for a few weeks, sorry, and hope you love yogurt. Ugh — and he was something of a dentist's chair coward even about routine cleanings and fillings. But it had been more the expense that had deterred him; on his salary it would have been an expense scary in its own right. At those prices, the old college joke about his name would have assumed high appropriateness — he would have been owin' for a long time, no doubt about it. He had had, and had now, no desire to lose his teeth, but he hadn't even made the appointment to go back; and then he'd been transferred to New Hampshire.

He looked again at the door, the sign. From the look of the place, he half-entertained the whimsical thought that if he walked away and returned tomorrow, the office wouldn't be there anymore, like in those "Twilight Zone" stories or something. But enough of that nonsense — as unattractive as the place was on the outside, maybe it would be all right on the inside. Certainly an office that advertised itself as doing family dentistry must be respectable — and weren't there laws about keeping up a certain standard of competence and cleanliness? Damned sure there were. Probably the doctor just didn't want to give over a big chunk of the profits to leasing one of those swank-looking office rookeries out in the suburbs. In any case, if what he saw inside wasn't reassuring enough, he could later cancel any appointment they might wangle from him, or just leave without making one in the first place. As disagreeable as it was to contemplate, the work did need doing, and perhaps in such a part of town as this the prices might be right and the service still of good quality.

Pushing through the door before he could give himself time to lose his nerve, he found himself threading a long, dim corridor terminating in another door, this one with an opaque pane of glass emblazoned with the same message as the sign outside. He went in.

The waiting room did indeed present a refreshing contrast to the ex-

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ternal impression, with its walnut paneling, comfortable-looking chairs, tasteful art prints, and tableful of fresh-looking issues of the *New Yorker* and *Time* and *Reader's Digest*. The music softly piping from some unseen speaker was even baroque, and not that nondescript generic stuff so often heard.

"Good morning. May I help you?"

The woman at the reception counter was middle-age, not unattractive, and was smiling a welcome to him.

"I—er—I think I need to make an appointment for a periodontal job. My old dentist in Syracuse recommended it. I don't have any records with me, though."

She handed him a form on a clipboard. "Would you please fill this out for our records? Dr. Gueule is going to be unengaged this morning, and I think he can see you without prior appointment, if you would like."

The overall impression was a good one, he reflected, taking the clipboard. But what about the money?

"Ah, could you give me a rough idea how much the procedure might cost?"

She ruffled some papers and smiled up at him again. "One quadrant, sir?"

"Yes. Upper left."

"Dr. Gueule can do that for you for two hundred dollars. You needn't pay today; we can send you a bill. Do you have dental insurance?"

"Yes, yes I do. I don't think I've met the deductible yet, though."

"Well, we'll give you all the necessary forms to send in."

He returned her smile. "Thank you. And by the way, that's a very reasonable charge."

"It's kind of you to say so. We like to think we offer our services very reasonably. That's part of what we believe family dentistry is all about."

Again he returned her smile and took a seat to fill in the registration form, returning it to her when he was done. "If you'll have a seat again, the doctor will be with you," she said.

By the time he had flipped halfway through a recent issue of the *New Yorker* from back to front, scanning the characteristically wry cartoons, a side door opened and the same woman leaned through. "Mr. Tyler?" It was a formalism, since no one else was waiting at the moment. "Dr. Gueule will see you now. This way, please."

He followed her through a carpeted corridor past two or three rooms, to the last door on the right, where there was the usual dentist's chair and associated paraphernalia. "Please make yourself comfortable. The doctor will be right in."

He stretched back in the reclining chair and tried to assume that pose, loose and easy, relaxed in the hands and feet, that usually seemed to serve him best at such times. Remember, his mind exhorted, it's better than losing your teeth and ending up some-

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day with dentures, for God's sake. On the wall to his right hung several diplomas, their Gothic printing so stylized that, at this angle at least, he couldn't quite make them out. Well — the chap must hail from some decent school of dental medicine or he wouldn't be practicing at all. Right? What kind of name, Gueule? French, apparently. Lots of Canadian French around here. But maybe he was even educated in Europe; who could tell?

Seemingly from nowhere, as things seem to happen when viewed from a nearly supine position in a dentist's chair, the doctor came in. Owen squinted up at him, seeing in the periphery of the swivel light a rather unusual face — rather pale, thin-lipped, only faintly smiling, business-like, though not in any identifiable way unpleasant. He appeared to be about Owen's own age, forty or so. The man extended his hand, introducing himself. Owen shook hands.

"We'll just need a couple of quick X rays, Mr. Tyler, to see where we stand." He swung the X-ray arm over, took the pictures, and withdrew. "Back in a moment."

When he returned, he settled himself and held the X rays up to the light for Owen to see, pointing to a couple of spots in particular. "See this space here? Considerable bone loss there, and there, too. Nothing that we can't arrest just fine, but it's good that you came in when you did." He withdrew the X rays. "Let's get to work, and we'll have you in good shape in no time."

The doctor administered the Novocain and waited while Owen felt the left side of his mouth and face grow numb. The doctor also slipped Owen's shirt sleeve up and gave him an injection. To Owen's questioning look, he explained, "Just a mild relaxant. It helps in the procedure, and I prefer this to the nitrous oxide gas many dentists use." He arranged his instruments on a tray. As usual, Owen found them unpleasant of aspect, gleaming coldly in the light.

"Jill, we're ready." The woman from the reception desk came in with some more instruments — she was evidently a dental assistant as well as receptionist. And they began.

"We're just separating the gum in this quadrant from the underlying tissue, Mr. Tyler. Feel anything?"

"Uh-uh."

"Good. You'll hear a little bit of a scraping sound now; I'm getting off all those calculus deposits that are too deep for ordinary cleaning. You seem to keep your teeth clean, but these are things you can't reach, because the gum has grown down over them. Looking good, all things considered — fairly healthy bone underneath."

Owen found himself clenching his hands in his lap, and forced himself to try to relax them and think about something else, something other than those sounds that the soft strains of Vivaldi didn't quite cover over.

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"Jill, would you scrape this section while I get the sutures ready?"

"Sure." The woman took the instrument in one hand, her other hand busy with the suction, and began to scrape — a little more vigorously than the doctor had done, Owen thought, his hands clenching again. Damn, these dentists entrust an awful lot sometimes to their helpers, he reflected, trying again to make himself relax. He did feel some pain this time, widening his eyes, and when she withdrew the gleaming instrument between scrapings, he thought that from the corner of his vision it looked very red. The scraping seemed to go on for a long time, and the suggestion of pain was heightening.

"That's good, Jill. Looking fine. I'm starting on the stitches now, Mr. Tyler. We'll need several of them." Owen glimpsed a gloved hand drawing a suture down and them up. Now he could swear the Novocain wasn't entirely masking the pain.

"Jill, you do this one," the dentist said, withdrawing from view.

She took the thread and the suture instrument and began. God, he thought, is she — I thought only a doctor could — ouch! Shit! As she drew the thread through, he now distinctly felt it pulling his gum, sending up terribly scuttering little accesses of pain.

And now there was another sensation, one far from comforting.

The numbness in his face and mouth was definitely and quickly fading, and being replaced with another numbness. He sought to reposition his clenched hands and found that it was like moving them through cold molasses. It was the same with his feet. And with the rest of his body.

Everywhere but his mouth.

The woman gave a particularly sharp pull on the suture, but his grunt of pain seemed only to die, thickened and unheard, in his throat. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Dr. Gueule had returned; but he made no motion to retrieve the suture instrument, leaving it to the woman, who was now looping it in strange directions and incomprehensible patterns. The dentist looked down with that tight almost-smile of his.

"I see from your registration form that you have no wife or children, Mr. Tyler."

Owen found himself unable to answer even in a throat-sound.

"Well, nevertheless, you must have reflected that the term 'family dentistry' would seem to bode well of a dental office, would it not? Even an unmarried man must find comfort in the mental imagery of an office where one can have dental care not only for oneself but also for one's whole family."

Why all this? Owen thought, a brittle shard of cryptic panic beginning to rise in his mind. He tried to move his hands; he could not.

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The doctor's face reverted to a bland but unsmiling expression. "Well, there comes a time to disencumber yourself of foolish, sentimental notions, Mr. Tyler. We have our own meanings here." He motioned with his head, and three other people entered the room — one a teenage girl with a vapid grin, one a teenage boy with thick-looking dirty hands and a surly scowl, the last a small boy with large, bright eyes.

The doctor nodded toward the woman, who continued to swoop and pull the sutures, filling Owen's mouth with a raging pain that now no scream could release. "Jill here is my wife. This is Anna, our daughter — what she lacks in skill she makes up for in enthusiasm. John here, our older boy, as you can see, is strong and strapping — in body, that is. And this" — he nodded toward the child — "this is our youngest, Tommy. We're all particularly proud of him."

At this, Tommy's eyes brightened even more, coming to rest with avidity on the tray of instruments in his father's hands. But all Owen could think of now was that awful smile finally widening upon Dr. Gueule's lips, lips that parted to reveal a mouthful of dreadfully discolored and misshapen teeth, teeth more repellent yet in the act of speech.

"We have our rules in this family. You need a lot more work, Mr. Tyler. But Tommy will have to wait his turn and go last." The grin waxed truly hideous. "He's only six."

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No doubt that most of us are obsessed with salaries and deals and coming out on top, to the point that we forget that what we do is supposed to be fun . . .

Celebrating

BY

BARRY N. MALZBERG

At the Institute, Jessica's latent ability, her remarkable raw talent, had blossomed. Anyone could see this. From simple loops and twirls, rigid suspensions and perilous dips, she had grown to intricate convolutions, somersaults, even figure eights. She had come home at the first break with an entirely new repertoire, and, seeing what she could do, the nonchalant skill of the child as it was expressed in a truly artistic, even *subtle* fashion, Thompson had found himself: filled with pride and anger together: they had gotten her too cheap. Talked him into a wretched contract, downplayed the child's potential, haggled him into subservience. "A *natural* talent," he whispered, watching Jessica demonstrate upside-down walking and those beautiful, almost mysterious figure eights. "Strange and wonderful. Once a generation." He did not even consider complaining directly to the Institute. They would wave the contract in his face, remind him that a deal was a deal, contact his employer, make his life miserable. Thompson knew how such things had to be managed; he had read up on them.

You went directly to the government.

The best way to the government, though, was not through the Department of Psionic Control; the regulators (like regulators everywhere) were in the pocket of the Institute. All of the staff would end up on the payroll after a change of administration. So you had to go the General Ombudsman on matters like this. They didn't like you doing that; they wanted the Ombudsman as a last resort or no resort at all — but Thompson was no fool, and he knew how these things

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worked. "Look at that," he said to the government man whose name plate said *Wilbur Stone* after Jessica had completed her ceiling walk. "Look at that work. They told me she had barely any ability at all, so little that it was hardly worth developing — and this is what she can do after just three months there."

"Two months and two weeks," Jessica said, "and most of the time we were studying physics, not really working at all."

"Exactly," Thompson said. "They didn't even begin serious training until a few weeks ago."

The government man shrugged. he did not appear very experienced, but his eyes were knowledgeable in an unpleasant way. "I'm sorry, you know," he said, "but a contract is a contract, and if you state that you signed, then you accepted the conditions—"

"It isn't a contract if they lie to you, mister," Thompson said. He opened his briefcase, removed the papers, and laid them on the government man's desk. "If you look these over, you'll see she was taken as a 1-D-1, they call it — a beginner, what they call a naked talent. Naked talents don't ceiling-walk or figure-eight after two months."

"Figure eights are *fun*," Jessica said, "and they're easy, no matter what they tell you." She was an endearing child, albeit defiant now and then, and Thompson had conferred with her earlier, making sure to enlist her cooperation, to make sure that she had no smart remarks to make about the nature of her upbringing or a father who would take money to sell her to a circus — which were points that she made earlier and unnecessarily before she had gone off to the Institute. Thompson shuddered thinking of what her mother had had to say in letters.

Fortunately, though, that woman was on the other side of the country, he had sole custody, and there was only minimum contact. If her mother had known that Jessica had entered the Institute under the miserable agreement that Thompson had signed, there would have been difficult times indeed. He cringed just thinking about how awful it all would have been.

Wilbur Stone, the government man, stared at him. "It just gets me *so* mad," Thompson said, "to have been cheated like this. Can't you understand that? That's why you people in the department are here, right, to protect us from those kind of practices. Aren't you?"

Wilbur Stone said nothing; he was examining the contracts. He squinted as if in deep concentration, leaned forward, and rubbed his nose against the paper like an animal. Thompson cringed again. Jessica kicked at the leg of her chair and then floated slowly, drifting through a lazy, elegant figure eight.

"Could you please *stop* that?" the

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government man said. "I mean, it makes me very nervous; could you get her to stop doing that, please?"

One could not make Jessica do or stop doing anything, Thompson wanted to say but did not. "Jessica—"

"I mean, it just gets me very nervous. It's all routine for you, maybe, but to see something like this—"

"But you must see it all the time," Thompson said. "You work with these people, don't you? Come on, Jessica, get off the ceiling."

"Oh, I *see* it," Wilbur Stone said. "That isn't the same thing, you know."

Jessica, back in her chair, had the knuckle of her left thumb in her mouth as she gave Wilbur Stone a long, unpleasant, searching stare. "Don't yell at me," she said.

"I don't mean to yell at you, Jessica, but it just gets me upset; don't you understand that? It could appall someone."

"Well, I think it's neat."

"Well, for you it's neat," Wilbur Stone said, "but it's hard to take levitation for granted."

"Well, you ought. It's your job, isn't it?"

The government man gave a despairing sigh, put his hands in his hair uncomfortably, and stared at the contracts. "I see that they refer to her ability as inherited," he said. "I deduce from that, Mr. Thompson, that you also can—"

"Not really," Thompson said firmly. "I mean, not anymore. I don't keep up with it, so to speak, never have, not for a long time. One flier in the family is quite enough. You've got to practice all the time, you know, to be any good at all, and have training when you're young right through your teens. I never kept up with it. I never had the advantages early, and *my* parents didn't want me to develop—"

He stopped abruptly. Now he actually sounded resentful, as if he envied Jessica her opportunity, when the truth was that it had been the happiest day of his life when he had stopped believing that his awkward, embarrassing flight was worth anything at all. He had been overjoyed to stop. "They told me that her ability was common, that almost anyone could do it," Thompson said bitterly. "That's how they got me to sign that paper for next to nothing."

"Well, I wouldn't call it next to nothing," the government man said judiciously. "It's not that bad an agreement, you know, even though there are no renegotiation clauses, which appears to be your principal complaint. I mean, they didn't mislead you, after all; more than half the population has the latent ability, and it's been coming out increasingly through the generations, what with the evolution of good training techniques—"

"You sound like *them*," Thompson said suspiciously. "That's exactly the line they were handing me, about half the population. You're on their side aren't you?"

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"I'm objective."

"Are you? A lot of kids can fly a little, but not ceiling-walk or figure-eight like that. She could be a professional; I know it. She can make the Olympics and then the leagues."

"Daddy," Jessica said gently, "you shouldn't yell at Mr. Stone. It just makes you madder, and it doesn't do any good."

Thompson subsided and leaned back. "I wasn't yelling," he said. "I was just trying to make a point, Jessica; sometimes to make a point, grown-ups raise their voices a little, but that isn't actual *yelling*, only—"

"You see, Mr. Thompson," the government man said, "the point is this: The problem with these contracts as far as I can see is that you feel the Institute got your daughter cheap, and I agree that her progress has been remarkable; but the fee is not inequitable, and a contract, well, a contract is definitive unless it can be proved that it was signed under duress. Now, there's no such allegation here—"

"I didn't say duress, you government man. I said they lied."

"My name is Stone. Wilbur Stone. I'd prefer it."

"Those were *lies*, Wilbur Stone, that's what I'm saying. I see your nameplate right on that desk, but by me, you're just the government man, giving me government talk."

"I can understand your outrage," Stone said, "but it doesn't look like any kind of a case to me. The facts are clear, and although there are varying interpretations. . . ." He paused. "You can always file an appeal."

"*This* is an appeal," Thompson said angrily. "It says right on your door, 'Complaints and Appeals.' I checked all that before I filed here to see you, and then I had to wait for weeks to get through."

Stone stood reluctantly, as if the various limbs and extensions of his frame were being slowly tugged into this new position by strong but invisible forces of pain. "There's nothing more I can do," he said. "This is a denial, that's all." Solemnly, he extended his hand toward Jessica. "It was very nice to meet you, young lady. You fly very nicely — beautifully, in fact — and I'm sorry that it made me nervous. It's good, though."

"This isn't fair," Thompson said. "I know all about the government, but really, this isn't fair at all. You shouldn't be allowed to do this to ordinary people. We're —"

Jessica stood. "It was nice to meet you, too," she said. "Let's go now."

"Oh, we're going," Thompson said, "We're going, all right."

"It's not his fault. He's nice. I think he wants to help us."

"Isn't anyone trying to help us," Thompson said grimly. "That's the whole point of being underclass: there's no one there at all. But we live and learn, government man; we bide our time—"

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Stone said nothing, only stared; and after a while, Thompson could see that it was pointless: nothing could be done. They had their methodology — that was all there was to it — and it was on their property, too. He motioned to Jessica and led her from the office, leaving the door open behind them. Make *him* close it. That was all there was left you, those little gestures of contempt. But they meant nothing.

In the corridor, holding his daughter's hand, walking her through the wide hall under the great, distant ceiling, Thompson felt the assurance that he had simulated in the government office begin to slip like an ill-tied cloak. He had forced himself to a kind of dominance there, but now the interview over, his position said to be of no merit, he felt himself beginning to slip into the same Randall Thompson that he had known for all these decades — that sniveling, easily broken Randall Thompson who had been victimized by his childhood, victimized by that woman, victimized finally by the Institute and the government man. They knew just what to do with him. Everything worked for people like that because they knew secrets.

He felt the humiliation — it was difficult to handle, not easy to take all of this — and if it had not been for the little girl beside him, he might have given in to it. But there was no way that they would break him; he was going to remain strong in front of her. After all, he *was* the father; he had fought for that, and he had a position to maintain. It was an honorable thing to be the father, and it did not come casually; if it had, he would have let all of that go sometime in the past and been out of this. No way, no more.

He squeezed her little hand. She was his daughter, and that meant something. Two young secretaries clutching papers floated by him conversing intently. A youngish bureaucrat with a bright red bald spot arced past head first at a distance of inches. "Watch it, you," the bureaucrat said. The secretaries giggled. Even government men could fly.

"Come on," Jessica said. "Let's do it, too. They're staring at us because we're the only ones walking."

"But I don't want to fly. We walked in and we should walk out."

"Oh Daddy," Jessica said, "just stop it now; don't be like the rest of them, always thinking about what you should or shouldn't do. They tell us at the Institute just to be ourselves; that's the best way. Let's fly now."

"Jessica—"

"Flying isn't so bad," Jessica said intensely. "It's just that you make it that way because you're so mad at the school and everything. But it's kind of fun. I don't want to forget that." She dropped his hand, rose against him, then was suddenly above his head, giggling. "Come on," she said. "This is nice."

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Thompson hesitated. Jessica reached out a hand and tugged at his elbow. To his mingled disgust and excitement, Thompson felt his feet leaving the floor.

"See?" Jessica said. "It's easy. Come on, more now."

Thompson reached for her hand and flapped his elbow. Oh my, oh my: it had been years. He felt himself rising gently. Was it that you couldn't forget? Was that the point? His head was close to the ceiling. Jessica pressed hard on his shoulder, averting collision. "Figure eight now," she said, then dropped his hand and went into slow descent. It was a long, long way down. Two clerks, braced against a wall to give room, watched the intricacy of her slow fall. It was beautiful. Thompson inhaled deeply and followed. Breathe, drop, revolve. Kick, straighten, drop, revolve—

"When you hit the floor now," Jessica said, "you bounce."

"I remember," he said. "I remember."

Yes, when you hit the floor, you bounce. Falling slowly, gracefully in the thick air exhaled by all of the government people, Thompson felt the first thrust of an emotion he had not known for many years; and reaching for the floor, pushing off the floor, *bouncing*, he gave a cry of release.

"You see, Daddy?" Jessica said, springing above him, her arms extended, paddling. "It's supposed to be fun."

"Yes," Thompson said, positioning himself awkwardly to follow her, "yes, I forgot that. I really did."

Oblivious of their newly entranced audience, the two swimmers swept on.

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David Busby writes: "I spent the early part of my life in Pakistan, and since have worked in electronics, done agricultural work; been a printer, a bookseller, a tree-feller and a construction worker." He now lives in the remote border country between England and Wales with his wife and young son. "The Gallery of Masks," his first story for F&SF, *is, at heart, a who-dunnit — but an unusual one in which the crook is a very shifty fellow indeed.*

The Gallery of Masks

BY
DAVID BUSBY

Few people remember the Theater of Paradoxes now, though it was a sensation at the time. But that is the nature of Mandagorria: it soon exhausts the vitality of its latest fads, and within a season they seem to belong to the oblivion of some remote epoch of the past.

It was Jean who persuaded me to go with her to the much-heralded premiere. The occasion was an evening entertainment, held outdoors in the Rialto Park, which in itself promised a degree of pleasure.

I felt rather curious anyway. The impresario, the improbable Dr. Caballa, was previously unknown in Mandagorria before his sudden appearance on the scene: yet in no time he was at all the fashionable parties, and the only topic of conversation on The Heights was of the forthcoming Theater of Paradoxes — of what it actually was and, most important of all, who had and did not have tickets for the first performance.

It was a charity performance, and the tickets were enormously expensive, but, perversely, that made them only more attractive, for on The Heights, money was of no consideration. How Jean came by *her* tickets I could not guess and did not ask, since they cost as much as her annual salary as an assistant to a captain of police.

The evening was unseasonably pleasant — a slight breeze from the mountains was mitigating the customary desert heat. The gardens were festooned with lanterns, and folding seats had been arranged to face a gaudy canvas theater erected in a grassy dip. Everywhere there were stewards dressed as clowns assisting the elegant and slightly bemused patrons to their places.

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The thing started with a sudden blare of off-key music, and the extraordinary figure of Dr. Caballa leapt onto the stage wearing a black leotard and tights, his face made up chalky white.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he cried. "Tonight I promise you an entertainment such as you have never seen before. I promise you astonishment and marvels! I promise what is truly the Impossible! And remember as you watch, that though there is a cast of thousands, they are played by just six performers. Please remember: *just six*!"

Then he jumped to the left of the stage as the curtains began to open.

Whatever else the audience was expecting, I was certain it was not what followed. The nearest thing I could recall was the street entertainment of my Barrio childhood: grotesque and crude. It was a frantic helter-skelter of vaudeville acts woven in with an absurd story line that I completely lost in the barrage of jugglers, magic, fire eating, strip tease, and song-and-dance routines that interrupted it at every turn.

The audience was stirring uneasily: the cream of Mandagorria society suspected it was being laughed at. Yet, reluctantly, it was fascinated. This was partly the mesmerizing presence of Dr. Caballa himself in his role as master of ceremonies — continually commenting on the unfolding drama, projecting a caressing whisper to the farthest seat one moment, a ringing brass-throated roar of rage that made us all jump in fright the next — but it was also the stage action, which really was astounding. It seemed incredible that six men and women could do it all, involved in dozens of changes of roles, of costumes and makeup, with never a single hiatus in the pace. There were so many comings and goings, it sometimes seemed there were more than twice their number busily crowding the stage. I certainly have never seen anyone give a solo operatic aria that ended in a display of fire breathing!

But one little scene, lasting no more than two minutes, summed up the Theater of Paradoxes for me.

The lights dimmed and came up again, the band tootled absurd military music, and the actors started marching stiffly across the tiny stage dressed as toy soldiers.

Logistically, there could be no more than four actors actually visible at any time: as one went offstage, another joined the back of the line, ad infinitum. That they did it without a break was very clever; then I noticed that the uniforms were not the same each time a soldier appeared — and then, even the faces changed. Some were bearded, some clean-shaven; some short, some tall, same fat, some skinny.

If there were twenty players, I'd have been amazed — it was impossible that six could do it.

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But they did. Before our eyes.

Then there was a clash of cymbals, the music stopped, the lights went out; and when they came up again, almost instantly, we were in the next scene: two couples playing a serene game of mixed-doubles tennis.

"But that was impossible!" Jean protested as the applause broke like a storm. "It must be a cheat — there just *must* be more than six of them."

But I didn't think there was any cheating, not in the conventional sense, anyway. There was something here far deeper, more mysterious, and masterful than mere trickery. At any rate, when the show ended, it was clear that Dr. Caballa had achieved a stupendous success and that the future of the Theater of Paradoxes in Mandagorria was assured.

Afterward there was a reception in a large marquee pitched nearby, where the impresario and his company courteously received homage. I did not intend to stay long, but somehow or other, Jean and I found ourselves being introduced to Dr. Caballa.

"And how did you find our little entertainment, senorita, Captain?" he asked. His natural voice was deep and sonorous.

Jean answered: "I thought it was amazing."

He smiled. "So. That is good. I wish to amaze, you see. But tonight was nothing, a mere rehearsal." He waved dismissively. "That is why I came to Mandagorria — here is the only place in the world to bring my experiments in drama to fruition."

"Is that so?" I said curiously. "And why is that?"

"Why? Because this wonderful and unlikely city of yours is already so like a stupendous stage set. What an opportunity there is for the impresario who would dare to turn Mandagorria itself into a vast symbolic drama." There was no irony in his voice, but I was sure he was laughing at me.

I smiled politely. "Would we Mandagorrians, as players in your company, see your script?"

He smiled back in turn. "As any stage manager will tell you, Captain, never let the actors know too much." Suddenly Caballa's expression became irritated as he notice a man hovering close by, trying to gain his attention. He turned back to Jean and myself. "You will excuse me now? It was most pleasant talking to you."

We left then, but on the way out, Jean said, "Did you notice the man who interrupted us?"

I looked. The stranger was deep in earnest conversation with the doctor, who still seemed irritated by his presence.

"He doesn't look very interesting to me, Jean."

"That's just the point — have you ever seen a person who looked *less* interesting? If ever a man is faceless, he is."

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I looked again and saw what she meant. His was a face so anonymous, so blank, so lacking in the impress of human character that he was, as Jean said, truly faceless. I think only the sharpest observer of human beings — which she certainly is — would have noticed him at all.

Policing The Heights is a fascinating business. It is a unique social mix where an old and extremely rich aristocratic elite uneasily rub shoulders with their ostentatiously wealthy inferiors, who in turn insecurely patronize a declining, impoverished subnobility. There is also a leavening of fading show-business personalities, political exiles, discarded revolutionaries, artists (a fair-sized colony), and émigré socialites fleeing from the beleaguered outside world. All of which provides rich pickings for con men, avaricious gigolos, fraudulent cultists, and other parasites.

But one of the troubles with this collection of money and pretension is that every other inhabitant is someone able to pull considerable influence, which often means that otherwise quite routine matters have to be handled by senior officers. When I get a phone call from the station at 4:30 A.M., it means that someone of importance has a complaint, or has even been landed — but probably, in either case, over something trivial.

It was a few days after the performance in Rialto Park when the loud, insistent call of the telephone summoned me from my pleasant slumbers at precisely that uncivilized hour.

"Quevalla here," I said in my most unfriendly manner.

"Sergeant Santos, Captain," said a breathless voice. "Can you come down, sir? I'm afraid we have a difficulty."

"So? What is its name?"

"You will not like this, sir," the sergeant replied unhappily. "We have Count Manfred La Falla here."

Not merely a big fish, but a shark. "What's his problem, Sergeant?"

Now I was fully awake. "In *custody*! Are you mad? Don't you know who he is?"

Santos began trying to explain, producing some garbled account of a valuable icon taken during a party at Maria da Costa's villa, and that she was accusing La Falla of the crime.

I did not hear the rest: incredulity had made me deaf.

La Falla was one of the richest men in Mandagorria, the illustrious head of an aristocrat clan, a pillar of society, patron of the university, a city father, and a great deal besides. The thought that such a man had become a common thief made me reel.

". . . witnesses . . . nearly red-handed . . . no alibi. . . ," Santos was still babbling on the other end.

"Send a car," I interrupted, and banged the handset down, swearing to myself.

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Jean was standing at the open door in a dressing gown. "I'll get breakfast while you shave," she said calmly.

"You get back to bed!" I snapped.

She gave me a mocking smile. "I'm a big girl now, Daddy."

The district police station is one of the imposing rococo facades hemming in the Little Square perched at the very top of The Heights. In the day it is a pleasant, airy building, busy with people and the energetic pulse of purposeful activity; but at night it is nearly deserted, dim, shadowy, and forlorn, like a once grand hotel gone to seed.

When we entered the reception lobby, there were five officers clustered round the duty sergeant's desk in the brightly lit area behind the counter, arguing in subdued voices. One of them glanced up, saw me, and whispered urgently: "The Fat One is here!" The five hurriedly disappeared.

"Fat One is indeed here, Sergeant," I said irritably. "Who is handling La Falla?"

"Lieutenant Manton, sir."

I sighed. "It would be."

Manton was a policeman of long experience, but little sense and positively no imagination. He had, it seemed, got Maria da Costa in one room, where she was giving an operatic impression of hysterics; while La Falla was in another, striding up and down in a tigerish rage, demanding to see his attorney, threatening all kinds of hellfire for his wrongful arrest; while between them milled almost the entire night-duty police force of The Heights in farcical panic.

I reflected for a few moments. "Jean, my dear, will you try to calm our troubled victim and get a statement out of her? Sergeant — send the lieutenant up to my office immediately." I plodded to the stairs, ignoring a muffled outburst of shouting from down the corridor: there was no point in intervening in the unpleasant affair until I had the facts: the diplomatic damage was done.

Manton was a thin, bony man with a thin, bony personality, but tonight, at least, his exertions had given his complexion an almost lifelike pallor.

I was lighting a cigar when he entered, and he waited for me to finish the ritual before he complained: "I did *not* authorize Santos to call you in. It was totally unnecessary."

I could not conceal my astonishment. "Manton, do you know *who* it is you have arrested? La Falla's not some tin-pot troublemaker, but one of the best-connected and most powerful people in Mandagorria. If you have made a mistake, he can, and will, ruin us both. Think about it, man!"

"It is an open-and-shut case, Captain," he said sullenly. "Just because La Falla is—"

"Enough!" I said angrily. "The facts please, Lieutenant."

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Lieutenant Manton glowered and obeyed.

Madame da Costa was not one of The Heights's major socialites, but she did give frequent small dinner parties for her friends, of whom La Falla was one of her oldest. This particular occasion marked her birthday, which she celebrated by showing off her latest objet d'art: an icon she had somehow acquired from an Orthodox monastery in Turkey.

It seemed La Falla had shown particular interest in this, and after dinner, around 9:00 P.M., while the other guests settled in for a game of cards, he went upstairs by himself for another look. No more than a minute passed, when there was the sound of breaking glass followed by the shrieking of the security alarm. Moments later a servant arrived in the gallery and saw the white-suited figure of the count fleeing across the flat roof. It was an easy three-foot drop, through the open window.

At first no one believed it *could* be La Falla, and an unavailing search for him was made; and then, while the police were being called, someone thought of replaying the video system installed in the gallery. The result was unequivocal — a sequence that showed La Falla entering the place, looking carefully about, then removing his shoe and using it to smash the icon's glass-fronted showcase, and then escaping through the window into the night with the icon tucked under his arm.

"You have seen this tape?" I asked sharply.

Manton nodded.

"And it was our friend downstairs?"

"Either that or his doppelgänger."

Now Manton's account took a strange turn. Hardly had the search for La Falla commenced, when he actually presented himself at the station, in a very disheveled and angry state, claiming he had been kidnapped by his own chauffeur, half asphyxiated with chloroform, tied up, gagged, and dumped in the Octagonal Gardens off St. Vincent's Terrace. His anger became volcanic indeed when he was immediately arrested for a crime committed at a place he claimed never to have reached.

"And what does his driver have to say?"

"Pedro Delaquino? He denies everything — claims the Count gave him the evening off to enjoy the Feast of All Fools down in the Barrio with his family. We brought him in just before you arrived."

"I see. What about the La Falla household?"

"Apart from the servants, there is no one to question. La Falla is at home by himself — the rest of the clan are on winter vacation in Europe."

I considered the matter for a while, feeling very uneasy. My cigar had gone out, and I put it down. It tasted awful at this ungodly hour any-

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way. "*You* might think this business is open and shut, Lieutenant," I remarked eventually, "but all I see is a tangled mess."

Manton was vehement. "There are *eight* witnesses from that party. They all know La Falla well, and they all are damned certain he was there: there's no question of it! Anyway, what about the camera?"

"Yes, yes, yes," I said, rising impatiently from my seat. "But the motive, Lieutenant? La Falla is a man ruled by rigid — unbreakable — codes of aristocratic ethics. It is totally against his nature to betray hospitality and friendship by stealing what I am sure he would consider a tasteless bauble. And why invent this absurd story about his driver that he knew we would check? He's too intelligent to think he can fool us like that." I shook my head. "I like none of it. Nothing fits." I put up a hand to silence his protests. "Let me deal with this wretched da Costa woman."

Jean had managed to calm Madame da Costa's agitation somewhat by the time I came to see, and only a small application of my most unctuous manner was required to help her to brave, lip-trembling fortitude.

She was a silly, rich, pitiable old woman, profoundly, almost uncomprehendingly shocked by La Falla's betrayal. Also, she was far too distressed at that time to be of any use to me. I got Jean to arrange to have her sent home after getting her pathetic agreement to total secrecy. The last thing I wanted was the media muddying the waters.

Later, when she recovered, she would, I suspected, be a damned nuisance. She was not the real somebody La Falla was, but people who live at that level are never nobodies either. She would be assiduous in seeing her erstwhile guest humiliated by the process of law.

Outside, in the corridor, I turned to Manton. "I'll see the chauffeur up in my office next."

"But what about La Falla?" Manton squawked in alarm, as another faint outburst came to us.

"It won't make any difference now," I said gloomily. "Let him cook for another hour. Did you get statements from the other guests at the party?"

He nodded unhappily.

"Then you'd better do some desk work and get them ready for me to look at."

Pedro Delaquino was young and darkly handsome, but, by the look of him, was starting a fine hangover.

"I am innocent of everything, senor," he told me resentfully, after I told him to sit down.

"So am I, and a short time ago I was happily in bed: I did not ask to be here. Give me the right answers, and you can go home and nurse your bad head."

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He relaxed a little then.

"You know why you're here? The accusations against you?" I asked.

"Senor — they are infamous lies!" Delaquino burst out. "From five o'clock I was in the Barrio; and I can prove it."

"Captain," I corrected automatically. "Captain Quevalla. If so, you need have no fears. Let us get down to business. You say that the count gave you the evening off. Was that normal?"

It was not, he assured me. In fact, it was most unusual, but then, he claimed, there was something rather unusual about La Falla's behavior that afternoon anyway.

"Tell me," I said.

"I had driven him down to the university library like I always do on Tuesdays," he explained. "When I arrived back, I decided to get out the white Mercedes and polish it in the drive ready for the party that night. I suppose I was doing that for an hour or so, when I turned round and saw the count himself standing there, watching me. I nearly jumped out of my skin! He must have walked all the way back up by himself. I couldn't understand it: I always go back to pick him up at six o'clock prompt. Anyway, he just continued looking at me, Captain, as if he did not know me at all, and never saying a word. Just looking and looking, like he was examining me pore by pore. Then he asked what I was doing. So I told him.

"He nodded at me and asked what time we were going. I was pretty puzzled — how could he forget such a thing? — but I told him that, too. He looked thoughtful for a while, then said he fancied driving himself that evening, and I could go off duty at four o'clock. 'You come from the Barrio, don't you?' he asked. 'You shouldn't miss the Feast of All Fools.' The way he said it was an order. As far as I know, he's never driven a car in his life, but the count isn't someone you argue with. For some reason he wanted me out of the way after four. So I went."

Fleetingly, I wondered if it was a simple coincidence that everything had happened on the Feast of All Fools, the one day a year when order was abandoned to the rule of folly and anarchy.

"Did you discuss it with anyone else?" I asked. "The other servants?"

"No, Captain. The count told me specifically to mention it to no one."

Outside my window, morning had arrived, fresh and new-minted, and for a moment I watched a flock of doves wheel down out of the air and strut about the square like little emperors. I sighed. Delaquino was telling the truth, I was sure, and after a few more questions, I told him he could go.

At the door, he paused and looked back. "If you wish for me again, I shall be in the Barrio with my family." His face became flushed with anger. "My

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honor has been outraged: I shall not be returning to the La Falla household."

My interview with La Falla did not, as I expected, go well, though he did, to a degree, cooperate. He vehemently declared his innocence, reaffirmed his account of being kidnapped, and was completely unable to provide any corroboration.

"I understand you visited the university library yesterday?" I said.

"So?" he snapped. "It is my habit every Tuesday afternoon to consult the entomology section — one of my pastimes is the study of scorpions." He gave me a suitably venomous look.

"Why did you return home from the university early?"

"What do you mean? What nonsense is this? Delaquino picked me up at the usual time — six o'clock."

"I see," I said, keeping my voice bland and thoughtful. "And of course, there are people at the library who know you?"

He hestitated, guessing that what he said was important but not knowing why. He thinned his lips and replied: "I saw no one I knew. The university was nearly deserted because of the carnival in the Barrio." He paused for a moment. "However, one person did join me in the reading room later. I did not know him, but he had the impertinence to introduce himself. He possessed a buffoon's name: Dr. Caballa. There was something of the mountebank about him that did not make me care for him. But he did not disturb me further."

Dr. Caballa? What an odd cross-connection, I thought, remembering that strange figure capering about the stage in Rialto Park. Still, he might yet provide an alibi, which would only confuse matters even more.

"Naturally, senor, I will have that checked, and no doubt everything will be made clear in your favor, but I regret you must remain here meanwhile."

The count's jaw tightened. "I am afraid, Captain, you will indeed have reason for regret," he told me icily.

One way or the other, I was sure he was right.

I sent Jean to check the Caballa connection, but the doctor said he had never visited the university and had only the vaguest hearsay knowledge of La Falla himself. So much for an alibi.

For the rest of the day, Jean, Manton, and I were interviewing everyone connected with the case: the other guests at that ill-fated party, Donna Maria herself, her servants, and La Falla's servant. Early in the evening the three of us compared our findings in my office, and all the evidence led to the same conclusion: the count had stolen the icon. The only doubt that remained was in my own mind.

Suddenly I remembered Manton

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had been continuously on duty for eighteen hours, and I told him to go home to bed. Characteristically, he showed no gratitude.

After he had gone, Jean looked at me. "You must be exhausted yourself. Leave it, Fidel. Let's forget La Falla for a while and go for a meal at Clara's."

The only time she ever used my Christian name was when she was determined to have her way at all costs.

"How can I refuse such a sweet, iron-willed girl?"

"Don't get sentimental; it doesn't suit you," she said tartly and began to brush her hair.

I know plenty of people are rather scandalized at the relationship between Jean and myself: an obese, middle-aged bachelor of a policeman living with his young and attractive assistant.

The reality of the matter is that she is the orphaned daughter of a woman I once loved and foolishly sacrificed for my career long ago. When her parents died in a plane crash, she was a college student, and, as an old friend, I naturally kept an eye on her. She came to live with me in the vacations, and when college finished, she just stayed on without either of us thinking much about it. Her decision to enter the police service was entirely her own, but it was soon clear she was brilliantly suited to the work, and when an opportunity arose a few years later, I selfishly grabbed her for my assistant. I have never had a better assistant, either, but I know she is far too good to stay in that role for much longer.

Meanwhile, she looks after me like a dutiful niece, and I try not to think how much like her mother she is, and pretend to feel as a dutiful uncle should feel.

I love Clara's Bistro because it is the only place in Mandagorria you can get decent seafood, and we quite often treated each other to an evening meal there. But the excellent shrimp mousse remained half eaten on my plate as I moodily gazed through the window, watching the boulevard's prostitutes advertising their wares in the dusk, slinking in and out of the deep shadows of the plane tree.

"But why did he do it, Jean?" I plaintively asked after a long silence.

"La Falla?" She put her head to one side and gave me a sardonic look. "Psychology," she replied succinctly. I blinked at her. "What?"

"Dear, silly Captain!" she exclaimed. "How many of the crimes we deal with here can be called rational?"

Jean was right. Mandagorria, beneath the surface of its calm, ordered existence, is a very strange place. Sometimes to me the city seems like a hallucination: a persistent mirage at the edge of the desert. Here nothing is ever what it seems.

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I considered the count's character. "He *is* a very rigid man," I remarked, musing aloud. "A rigid mind, a lifelong adherent to a stultifying code of honor — a prisoner to dignity, to aristocratic rules of behavior . . . and then one afternoon he decided that it is all nothing, a useless emptiness, an illusion; and in an irrational gesture of despair, he takes up the apparatus of his entire life and dashes it to pieces."

Jean gave me an ironic look. "Very melodramatic. Why not say he had enough — and cracked?"

I relaxed and smiled fondly at her. "Yes. He cracked."

"But you don't believe it?" she asked curiously.

I shook my head. "Not really. But I suppose I have no choice. Tomorrow I shall see the chief of police to present my case because La Falla is who he is — and then I expect I shall have to formally charge him."

I pushed my plate aside and sipped the wine. "Apart from a couple of discordant details, I can't think there's anything to stay my hand."

Jean cupped her chin in her hands. "What details?" she asked.

"Well, this story of meeting Dr. Caballa in the library yesterday. What was the point of it, and why conjure *that* name, of all names? He must have know we would check."

"Fidel — have you considered that La Falla might actually have *wanted* to be caught? . . . All these unconvincing lies and deceptions. . . ."

"Yes, I have," I said. "Quite seriously, too; and in another man, I might believe it."

She looked crestfallen. "Never mind. . . . There was another point?"

"Gloves," I said reflectively. "According to Donna Maria's butler, La Falla wore gloves all evening, even at dinner. White kid gloves."

"To avoid fingerprints?"

"That is the obvious answer," I agreed. "Rather pointless, though, since he was so obviously present." I scratched my chin. "He was not wearing them when he arrived on our doorstep this morning, and I had the Octagonal Gardens searched." I sighed. "Enough is enough. I must put the business out of my mind long enough to get a night's sleep. You, too, Jean."

At first sight, the chief of police was not a very impressive person in his perpetually crumpled white suit: a small, swarthy man, with the serious, worried face of a minor bureaucrat. Yet here was probably the most powerful person in Mandagorria, though few people realized it. No one understood the subterranean voice of the city as he did. And though policy was made and unmade elsewhere, it was his unnoticed authority that implemented it, or did not implement it.

He waved aside my sheaf of papers once I had perilously settled my bulk

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into one of his uncomfortable chairs. "Tell me, Fidel — I can't get the feel of things with a text," he said. So I told him. He listened intently, although I suspected he already knew everything: little escaped him — through his shabby office, with its heavy, old-fashioned furniture, filtered news of everything that happened in the city.

When I finished the sorry tale, he settled back, tight-lipped and thoughtful. "You have done all that had to be done. I cannot see how we can avoid the inevitable."

By the inevitable he meant the bringing to trial of so important and powerful a man. We both knew he might have escaped unscathed if Donna Maria had been an ordinary person, without connections and influence of her own.

"Madame da Costa will not allow the matter to drop. I am certain of it," I said. "She is deeply wounded and she wants her revenge."

"It seems likely she will have it." He gazed quizzically at me. "I believe you think he is innocent?"

I was startled. Was he really *that* shrewd?

I said nothing, merely shrugged, and hauled myself up to go.

"If it is of any interest," he said dryly, before I reached the door, "I agree with you."

One morning, a few days after I had charged Manfred La Falla (and he had got himself bailed out), Jean told me, "There's an invitation here from Eleanor Sordanno." She showed me a gilt-edged card.

I sighed. "Don't suppose we'll be able to get out of that one." I glanced at the card and winced. "A masked ball, no less."

The main business of The Heights is the pursuit of pleasure and novelty, though lasting success is seldom achieved — ennui and lassitude hang heavily over the steep streets and pleasant, tree-shaded terraces. Gala balls, parties, and similar gatherings are endemic, and since so much on The Heights depends on the eternal ebb and flow of the social round, I make it policy to accept a proportion of invitations that come my way as a means of keeping my finger on the pulse. A masked ball at the villa of Madame Sordanno was likely to be less tedious than usual.

I'm afraid I don't enter into the spirit of these things, and went merely as myself with a simple black velvet mask. But Jean looked very fetching and nubile as a Greek nymph.

Naturally, most of the guests had costumes that were elaborate and expensive, but easily the most striking was an incredible Aztec skull-mask of crystal that one man wore. Although transparent, it so hideously refracted his features that the wearer was unidentifiable, and his voice, muffled by prismatic confinement, similarly offered no clue. He moved with con-

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siderable caution, and his view of the world must have been as fragmented as his multifaceted gaze was to the onlooker.

So Death himself would have come to the ball, I reflected, reminded of the fairy story, as the other guests thronged about him, trying to tease out his identity.

Jean could not take her eyes off him. "I'm only trying to guess who it is," she complained when I chided her.

"Ever the sleuth," I remarked, savoring the first of what I planned to be many canapés. "Unlike real life, all will be revealed at the appointed hour."

However, at midnight I was in the buffet room and missed the grand unmasking, and Jean had to come and find me, with some irritation.

"There you are," she said. "Come and see who the man in the glass mask is." I dutifully went through and observed a man carefully placing his mask in a wooden box that a servant was holding for him.

"My, my, so it's the faceless man we saw at the reception after the Theater of Paradoxes," I said with interest.

Having unencumbered himself from his disguise, he stood in the center of the room looking rather at a loss and ill at ease, no longer a figure of attention at all. The party flowed round him like water round a rock.

"I want to talk to him!" Jean hissed at me.

I was astonished. "Whatever for?"

"I just do."

I shrugged. We went over and introduced ourselves. He was called Emil Ennerson. Jean enthusiastically began praising his mask. I was mystified by her enthusiasm.

His vague face seemed pleased. "Really? It was better than the other masks, I suppose: I must say, I found them rather disappointing."

"It is Aztec, I believe?" I said gamely, for Jean's sake.

He gave me a serious look. "Oh no, I had it made for me." Then, realizing a better explanation was required, added: "You see, I am a collector. Of masks. In fact, I believe I have the most extensive collection in the world."

"Of masks?" I asked blankly.

"How fascinating!" Jean said quickly.

He turned to her quickly. "Do you really think so?" His pleasure was patent. "It is a rather esoteric branch of study. The usual emphasis is ethnographic, but my interest is the symbolic psychology of masks. Perhaps you would care to look over my collection? Since I've moved to Mandagorria, I have had my own private gallery designed to show it to its best advantage."

"Oh yes, we'd love to," Jean told him before I could stop her.

"Shall we say tomorrow, then?" he asked with a curious polite inconclusiveness, as if he were uncertain

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how to end the encounter. Finally he gave me his card, very formally bowed, and excused himself.

"What a colorless man!" I muttered when he had gone. I fixed Jean with my best interrogator's gaze. "And what lies behind *your* sudden interest?"

She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. "I'm not quite sure. He intrigues me. . . . While he wore that amazing mask, he was a sensation; but the moment he took it off, it was as if he had become invisible. Everyone just melted away." She gave me a sideways look, saw my skepticism, and laughed at me. "Don't be so serious. I want to see his collection. Masks have always fascinated me. Ennerson and I have something in common — I used to collect them, too, when I was a child."

"When *I* was a child, people used to wear devil-masks for the street carnivals in the Barrio," I said reflectively. "Really horrible, frightening things they were. They used to scare the life out of me."

Ennerson had a place called Fortuna Villa, a very large and sumptuous town house off Cocoa West, just ten minutes away on foot from our own apartment on the Spanish Terrace. Our host was eager in his greetings — the vociferousness of a lonely man, I thought. He escorted us through cool, high-ceilinged rooms to a patio at the rear. Here, with a view of a pleasant garden full of shrubbery and phony Greek statues, we sat sipping iced tea anbd exchanging banalities. As an ex-native of Rio newly arrived in Mandagorria, he was effusive in his praise for his recently adopted home. Then, suitably refreshed, we went inside for the viewing.

We entered a long, windowless gallery lit with artificial daylight where along the walls were dozens of niches, in each of which was displayed a single mask mounted on a pedestal. The effect was impressive, if unsettling: a surreal, air-conditioned temple dedicated to these schizophrenic totems gazing out from their shrines with an empty, impassive stare.

Ennerson was saying, "Some of them, obviously, are copies. The originals are out of my reach." He stopped at one. "For example, this full-face Saxon war helmet from the Sutton Hoo treasure in the British Museum. Or here — the Mask of Agamemnon from Mycenae: pure gold, though, like the one in Athens. I have them and similar ones because no collection is complete without them. But my favorites are the cult and theatrical masks."

We wandered slowly down the displays, pausing frequently for a short lecture. To me, despite their extraordinary variety, there was a kind of deep unity underlying their design: they were the apparatus of illusion; the aim of those who fashioned and wore the things was to delude and

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hide and make obscure.

Which was what I told Ennerson, but he was eager to correct me: "No, no, Captain, they are symbols of transformation. A mask transmutes the identity of its wearer. When the tribal shaman donned his sacred mask he was no longer a man, but a spirit summoned from the place of ghosts, both for himself and for those that witnessed the rite — they believed implicitly, and so it became true. So also, when theatergoers in classical Greece watched a play by Sophocles, they saw not masked actors but the gods and heroes themselves."

He paused and said, almost wistfully, "When I put on one of my masks, I cease to be Emil Ennerson —I become other than myself." He glanced shyly at us, then continued down the gallery, obviously embarrassed.

"Of course," he added, stopping in front of the crystal skull he had worn at the party, "the ideal mask is not even a physical object like this, but is *invisible*."

Jean looked puzzled. "How do you mean?"

He frowned as he searched for the right words. "I mean that no one should be aware that a mask is being worn. Imagine a mask of hallucination: the observer sees not the wearer of the mask, but what the wearer wishes to be seen."

"How could that be done? A kind of hypnotism?" she asked.

"*Hypnotism*?" Ennerson said with incredulous scorn. For a moment, something like passion struggled to express itself, then abruptly subsided. "It is merely speculation," he muttered with a shrug, and the matter was dropped.

I think what killed his enthusiasm was a sudden fear of seeming ridiculous. I sensed he was a man who desperately wanted to be taken seriously and who knew he never was.

Although the tour continued, it became hasty, and Ennerson's commentaries were sketchy, as if he wanted to get rid of us as soon as was politely possible.

After Jean and I took our leave of him, we walked slowly back home in the late-afternoon sunlight, idly swapping our impressions. For some reason, Jean was rather disappointed — she had expected the encounter to be far more interesting.

"Though I do feel sorry for him," she added. "They're his friends, those masks, aren't they? All he's got."

I thought of that solitary man in his huge, empty mansion, an emptiness within an emptiness.

"Perhaps," I said. "But how many people wear their friends?"

A couple of days later, Jean came into the office waving a piece of paper. "Got an application for a street parade. Should add a bit of spice to our dull life here: it's from Dr. Caballa."

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"What is it for? To advertise his theater?"

"I should imagine." She glanced at the application. "He calls it a 'street circus of thirty-seven performers and an elephant.'"

"Good God!" I exclaimed. "Elephants on The Heights? Still — why not? Just check out the route, and make sure they are billed for any damage." I remembered that evening in Rialto Park when a ticket was *the* talisman of superior status, and now Caballa had taken to the streets to drum up business. Mandagorria soon wore its novelties thin.

Though the La Falla case was still pending, it no longer dominated my thoughts as it had, and the reminder of the Theater of Paradoxes had pricked my curiosity about Dr. Caballa. Who was he? Where had he come from? What had he done before he came to Mandagorria?

Jean listened to me speculating aloud for a while, then asked, "Why don't you let me find out? I've nothing urgent at the moment."

So I left her to it, and after a couple of days, she had managed to put together a fascinating, if rather shadowy, portrait of the man.

"The first surprise is that he *is* a doctor. Of medicine. Look — it's all here." I glanced unhappily at the big pile of papers she dumped on my desk.

"Will I get through it before lunch?" I asked.

She grinned. "You damn well appreciate my hard work before you eat, dear Captain."

Caballa's real name was Bruno Holtz, or at least, that was what was given on his Brazilian passport. There were very large gaps in the record in the time since he had graduated, and he seemed to have spent years in various obscure posts all over the continent, many of them dubious, and not all connected with medicine. Finally he had ended up as the founder and director of something called the Institute of Psycho-Surgery, in Sän Paulo, until four years ago.

"Legal but shady," Jean remarked. "He claimed to have developed a spectacular advance in cosmetic surgery involving hormone treatment and some sort of weird psychological techniques — the details are pretty vague. Supposedly based, as far as I can make out, on research he had done among the rain-forest Indians of the interior. He credited them with having phenomenal physical control of their bodies through special drug-induced mental disciplines." She made a face. "I checked that with the Department of Anthropology at the university. I'm afraid they laughed at me, though very politely."

I grunted dubiously. "It seems a long way from a face-lift clinic to the Theater of Paradoxes," I said. "I can't see much of a connection. Are you sure it's the same man?"

She gave me a complacent look.

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"Ah, but there *is* a connection. These mental techniques he employed involved something called psychodramas. He actually had a little theater down there and used real actors."

"O.K. But all this was four years ago. What next?"

"Well, the local police suspected that behind this he was also doing clandestine plastic surgery for people who had a pressing need for new identities. Anyway, the institute suddenly closed. Things got a bit uncomfortable, perhaps, and Dr. Holtz vanished. No complaints. No police action. Just a few uneasy rumors. Then, six or eight months ago, the Theater of Paradoxes opens for business in Rio."

I leaned back in my chair. "Well, I never. There is certainly plenty there to chew on."

"Shall I dig deeper?" Jean asked hopefully.

I wagged an admonitory finger at her. "It's not our job to pry out of mere curiosity. I think I know enough about him now not to need more. Let's go and have lunch."

In any case, Jean would have had no opportunity for further inquiries. That same evening the celebrated artist Alfredo Casteneda was having a gala showing of his 3-D sonic crystals at the Desert Studio — when one of the guests, Piers Lowry, a fellow artist and well-known disciple, had, inexplicably and without warning, run amok and smashed several of the master's exhibits, including a very famous one on loan from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and then escaped before anyone could stop him.

Occasional outbursts of temperamental passion were a feature of The Heights's colony of artists, but nonetheless, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck prickle, especially when Lowry was picked up next morning by the Docks Area police, who found him wandering across the Archipelago Bridge in a very dazed and disturbed state claiming a memory blackout and, of course, having no alibi.

Then, four days later, a rich young heiress called Nora Teldorff was dragged away from seventy or so guests attending one of her notoriously wild parties, and raped in an adjoining room. No one intervened, despite her anguished screams, because her assailant was her husband. The latter was last seen by the stunned onlookers as he was running out of the house.

"Difficult charge to bring," Jean remarked when she joined me in the morning amongst the forlorn remnants of the interrupted party. "I mean, rape of wife by husband."

An officer brought us plastic cups of hot black coffee. I sipped mine with thankful relief. "I've just seen her in the hospital. She was pretty badly mauled. Broken arm, dislocated wrist, severe bruising of the throat. . . .

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She considers herself raped. Husband or not."

"Why on earth did he do it? And so publicly?"

I gave her a sardonic look. "It sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

She stared at me, and then it clicked with her as well. "Like the La Falla affair?"

"*And* the business at the Desert Studio," I said grimly. "This is the third crazy crime committed in front of witnesses."

Of course, it is human nature to link purely random similarities into a pattern that suggests some overall design — I wasted an awful lot of time chasing phantoms, but now I felt the pattern.

"Have you found Teldorff yet?" Jean asked.

"No — but what do you bet that when we do, he'll say he wasn't here last night, have some fantastic and insubstantial story to explain his absence, and no alibi at all?"

I finished the coffee and irritably threw my cup on the smoldering log fire.

She changed the subject. "Where was she raped?"

"In the library." I nodded at a pair of large double doors at one end of the room. "If you are going to look, be careful — the forensic squad haven't gone over it yet. Not that they will find anything useful."

But Jean did.

After a few minutes she yelled to me, and when I found her, she was on her hands and knees looking under the large sofa where Nora Teldorff had been ravished.

"What is it?" I demanded as she struggled to reach under with one arm. I tried to join her, but my agility was no match for my girth.

"It looks like a. . . ." Exasperated, Jean heaved the sofa back and scrabbled underneath. "There!" she cried, her face flushed with triumph and exertion. She held up a single white evening glove — a man's.

As I had predicted, Robert Teldorff turned up some hours later, vehemently protesting his innocence; so vehemently, in fact, that when he heard his wife had been raped, it took two officers and, eventually, a straitjacket to restrain him.

If he was acting, it was a good performance; but I did not believe he was acting.

I told Jean that I wanted to be left completely alone and undisturbed for a few hours in my office. There, without distractions, I was forced to face my worst enemy — my own intellect — and do something I usually left to my instincts, which was to assemble all the pieces of evidence and try to make a jigsaw puzzle of them.

In the end the only idea I got that linked the three crimes together was so fantastic that I simply kept on rejecting it; yet for all that, it was an

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idea that clutched the facts with a grip I could not release. The trouble was, it left me peering into the entrance of a labyrinth that seemed ever more shadowy and terrifying than the one I was trying to find my way out of.

I do not know how long my mental exploration lasted — at some point I had switched on my desk light but had long since done with reading. Then there was a tap on the door, and Jean put her head round with a warning look, and said softly, "Fidel, the chief of police is here."

She was about to leave us after she had shown him in, but he stopped her gently, saying, "Since you have been closely involved in the three cases, I think you might be able to contribute to the discussion. I'm sure Fidel will have no objections."

Jean tried not to look pleased and failed dismally. The chief sat down. "I am sorry I must interfere, Fidel," he told me, "but I have become worried about the implications of what is happening here on The Heights." He looked at me with his mild, endlessly patient eyes, and I felt very inadequate.

"I only wish I could offer some signs of progress," I said hopelessly. I brought him up to date with our catalog of inexplicable crimes, though I was sure he knew it all.

When I finished, the chief showed no reaction at all, merely leaned forward and picked up Robert Teldorff's glove in its plastic bag off my desk for a brief inspection.

"It has been examined forensically?"

"Yes," I said disgustedly. "Absolutely clean. Probably worn over something like a disposable glove."

"How very odd," he remarked thoughtfully. He turned to Jean. "What do you think its significance is? *Is* there any at all, or are we merely desperate for clues?"

She shook her head: "No, it is very important. It is the one certain link we have among La Falla, Piers Lowry, and Robert Teldorff. Coincidence is removed from the equation if all three men were wearing gloves like that one."

The chief looked doubtful. "But for what purpose? Each of them was so obviously and unmistakably present under the eyes of so many observers that the question of leaving fingerprints becomes absurdly irrelevant."

He glanced at me, wanting a response, but what could I say? It was at this point that I knew I could either pretend my complete mystification and ultimately find myself a bystander to someone else's investigation, or make my intuitive leap in the dark, which might make a complete fool of me and end me in the same predicament anyway.

But I am a good policeman, and that often means taking a risk.

"I do have an idea, Chief, but I don't think you'll like it," I told him.

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"You see, I believe the gloves were worn to avoid leaving the *wrong* fingerprints. Not La Falla's, not Lowry's, not Teldorff's, but someone else's altogether."

Jean's face was puzzled, but I saw that the chief understood me instantly. He considered for a while. "I *think* I grasp your meaning — you are suggesting that La Falla, Lowry, and Teldorff were all the victims of impersonation. In other words, three innocent men and one impostor?"

"One *brillant* impostor," I replied.

Jean muttered sotto voice, "My God, it would need to be."

The chief smiled slightly at her. "I'm afraid we are in agreement." He turned to me. "Fidel, you are asking us to believe too much — it is all supposition and no proof."

I said nothing; it was true.

But Jean, despite her skepticism, had been thinking hard. She burst out triumphantly: "There's something we've forgotten: Nora Teldorff's assailant left something better than fingerprints behind — a simple semen test will tell us if it was her husband or not who raped her."

I was astounded. She was absolutely right, and I certainly should have thought of it myself. I grabbed my phone and gave Forensic the necessary orders, with rising excitement. Then I began to feel a little more reflective. "What can possibly be the common motive behind such random crimes — a stolen valuable, some smashed works of art, and a rape?"

"Perhaps you are looking for too obvious a motive," the chief suggested slowly. "Supposing your notion is correct, the only common feature appears to be the *way* each crime was committed. There was nothing discreet about them; on the contrary, for your hypothetical impostor, they were acts of the most foolhardy kind of bravado. But perhaps that display of bravado is precisely the point: maybe what mattered above all was the challenge itself of carrying through such virtuoso impersonations."

"But how were they *done*?" Jean asked impatiently. "It is all very well talking about impersonations — but these are much more than greasepaint and hairpiece roles. Whoever is behind them — if anyone is — must be a genius: a real master of illusion." She looked at me. "But I know someone who fits that description, don't you? I mean Dr. Caballa."

I stared back at her, remembering La Falla's curious claim of meeting Caballa in the university library on the afternoon of the da Costa party. I had never liked that strange, resonant connection.

Was it possible there was a real connection?

I began to explain about the Theater of Paradoxes, but I need not have bothered; the chief knew all about it. In the middle the phone rang.

Jean answered it and listened with

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a steadily more concerned expression. She put the receiver down.

"There's been an incident at the Neon Club — someone called Bella Savorard has just had an emerald necklace stolen." She paused. "There are dozens of witnesses."

I wiped my brow. "Oh God — who is it this time?"

"I'm afraid this time it was a woman. Michelle Passanno, wife of the movie mogul."

"A woman!"

"Yes, and it really *was* a woman. One of the attendants nearly caught her, and the thief's dress was ripped off before she got away. Not a man in drag or anything."

I laughed shakily. "I think we are asking too much of our phantom impersonator this time."

We did not expect that we should find a seminaked young woman fleeing through the tropical night of Mandagorria clutching a quarter of a million dollars' worth of jewelry. The Heights is a maze of alleys and passages that anyone can slip through in the dark undetected. And so it was, despite the hundreds of police officers the chief had drafted in from all over the city.

Outside the Neon Club, after interviewing the distraught Mrs. Savorard and the equally distraught Leon Passanno, the chief stopped and gazed abstractedly at the lights of Mandagorria sprawling out below us. "Where do we begin, Fidel? Where do we start? What are we to make of it all?" There was no despair in his voice, just curiosity.

Jean was waiting for us by one of the dozens of police cars that choked the narrow street. She came over.

"I have some news. I phoned the lab while you were inside, about the Teldorff sperm sample. It's negative." She looked anxiously at us, and to make sure we got the message, she added: "Whoever raped Nora Teldorff, it wasn't her husband. You were right, Fidel. He's innocent. So must be La Falla and the others."

The chief actually closed his eyes for a few moments and murmured, "Truly this is madness." When he opened them again, he looked at me and said, "Earlier we were talking of Dr. Caballa, yes?"

"My driver will take us down," I said quickly.

When we arrived at the Rialto Park, it was obvious something had happened: a small crowd had gathered round the pavilion erected behind the theater itself, where the company lived, and there was already a patrol car there.

"I just radioed for you, Captain," a surprised officer said. Another man was with him: a witness. "Sergeant Androllo is inside."

Doctor Caballa lay faceup in front of a stack of garishly painted back-

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drops. Under the oil lamps that lit the place, it was difficult to realize that the damp patches on his dark clothes were blood.

"Stab wounds in the neck and shoulders," the sergeant, kneeling by the body, told us. "Probably one of those." He pointed to a rack of throwing knives. "He was still just alive when I got to him. Died as soon as I turned him over. My partner's got a guy who saw what happened."

The chief glanced at me. "Perhaps we shall get to the bottom of this after all."

Jean had been searching around outside with a flashlight, and found the murder weapon. And an emerald necklace.

Our witness, a man called Lazada, was not a regular part of the company but one of the hired stagehands and general laborers. He had been checking over the ropes of the theater after the performance, when a young woman in nothing but underclothes whirled by him out of the darkness, gasping and moaning, one hand clutching her face as if it hurt her, and went into the pavilion. After a few moments he heard Caballa shout, "Leave, all of you!" and the six actors and actresses rushed outside and stood on the grass in a worried, whispering knot.

Intrigued, Lazada went round the opposite side and listened.

"The woman was really out of her mind about something," Lazada related. "Real hysterical, she was. Right out of control. They were shouting and arguing, and then things seemed to come to a head, I guess. The next thing, they were both screaming, but Caballa louder than her, like something nasty had happened to him. Then it all went quiet. When I screwed myself up and went in, he was alone and in a pretty bad way. There was a big rip in the canvas at the back, which the woman must've made to get out through."

"And what of the actors?" the chief inquired.

"Gone," the man said laconically. "They just scattered. But pleased. Frisky. Like they'd been let out of jail."

"Surely there was more than that," I said in exasperation. "What did Caballa and the woman say to each other? Think, man — it led up to someone's death!"

Lazada looked sulky. "I couldn't understand half of it. She seemed crazy with pain. She said something had gone wrong, that. . . ." He grimaced in concentration, and hesitantly quoted, "'You've got to change me back, Holtz . . . my face, my body . . . burning all over, burning, burning, burning.' She kept saying that. He said something to calm her, but she yelled about not being warned, that something was hundred times worse than before. Caballa was real angry. 'I said you needed more training for a total transformation. It serves you

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right if it hurts. I can't do anything. You'll just have to wait for it to go off.' And then he gave a real mean laugh, 'If you don't like your face, wear one of your precious masks.' I think he pushed her too far with that. There was a struggle, a lot of screaming, like I said, then it was over." He looked round at us. "Pretty strange story, I guess."

Pretty strange indeed, I agreed to myself.

If you don't like your face, wear one of your precious masks.

Like the dawn, which was rapidly unshrouding the park from the mysteries of the night, so I began to sense the outline of it all — though it was something I was hardly able to grasp or believe.

I turned to the chief. "I know where to look now. I'll try to explain in the car, but we must hurry."

As we got in, I turned to Jean. "What the hell did you know that always made you so interested in Ennerson, our faceless man with the masks?" I demanded irritably.

She gave me a wan, pinched smile: she didn't know, either.

Manton was waiting for us at the Villa Fortuna with his men. "Any signs of life?" I asked him.

"No. Nothing at all."

"Let's try the front door."

It was unlocked.

Inside the large entrance hall, I instructed the dozen or so men: "Pair up — I want this place thoroughly searched. If you find anyone, bring them down here. Manton — come with us." I paused, trying to get my bearing from memories of my last visit. In the cool half-light coming in through the windows, it seemed a very different place.

"I'm trying to remember how we got to the trophy room, Jean."

"Down that corridor, I think."

The four of us — Jean, the chief, Manton, and myself — were halfway down, when, from beyond the double-glass doors ahead of us, we all heard a faint, eerie noise, like the mewling of an injured animal. My skin began to crawl. Manton, looking very pale, fumbled under his jacket and produced a revolver. Much as I dislike guns, I found its presence now very comforting.

The gloom in the corridor was insufficient to penetrate the lightless gallery on the other side of the glass, and there I paused, indecisively, distracted by the continual tormented moaning.

"I cannot imagine what we shall find, but I don't think it will be very pleasant," the chief said quietly. But even then his face showed no more than faint distaste. I did not know whether to admire or resent that terrible calm aloofness.

He went in and located a light switch.

I have heard that one of the more

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unpleasant punishments administered in the old Ottoman Empire was the practice of flaying alive the sultan's enemies. The result must have resembled what we discovered twitching feebly on the blood-smeared floor of the gallery of masks.

It was, or had once been, male; naked except for a pair of feminine briefs.

Jean had described Emil Ennerson as a faceless man, and that was now what he had truly and most terribly become.

In his slow, painful convulsions, his head was momentarily raised toward us, and what had once been a face was now a single featureless wound: a mask of blood.

I slowly reached out my hand behind me.

"Manton," I said with an effort, struggling with the oppression of horror, "give me your gun." For a moment I glanced at the chief and saw agreement in his dark eyes.

That was the end of the business — La Falla and the others were immediately released, of course (Madame da Costa's icon was found in a cellar of the villa), and only unanswered questions remained like an unresolved cadence left hanging faintly in the air.

"I wish we could get our hands on Caballa's actors," I said wistfully to Jean a couple of days later. It was evening, but the paperwork was finished. "They are the only ones who could let real light in on it all."

She gave me a scornful look. "We never will. They have been taught too well in the arts of disguise. But at least I was able to dig some information out on Ennerson — be grateful for that."

I was. It helped to fill in some of detail, knowing that he had spent most of his life in and out of various psychiatric clinics in Rio and elsewhere, and he had made several suicide attempts.

He was one of those unfortunate creatures who never have any apparent human presence at all, nonentities, literally, who are destined to a kind of despairing invisibility, never seen or noticed or cared about, unable to make contact, always ignored and forgotten. His obsession with masks was an almost too obvious symptom of his condition.

"They must have met in Rio," Jean said. "And Caballa must have agreed to let Ennerson try his 'masks of hallucination' in return for financing the Theater of Paradoxes."

"I doubt that we shall ever know, but it is likely," I agreed.

One thing I was sure of: it must have been a very unequal partnership. Caballa was a man to use others, never to be used himself. He needed Ennerson's wealth, but apart from that, the dependency was all the other way. I am certain he chose Ennerson's roles,

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too, for they indicated a degree of planning and a knowledge of The Height's social intricacies that would have been beyond a man so lacking in social instincts, to say nothing of the brilliant, subtle malice the impersonations involved.

Malice. That was the key to Dr. Caballa. A man who would turn all of Mandagorria into a vast Theater of Paradoxes of which he was the hidden impresario directing a drama of nightmarish illusion where the roles of his actors blended invisibly and destructively with the lives of real people and the social fabric of the city.

How Caballa actually achieved the transformations of his actors and of Ennerson is not something I really wanted to know. The latter's fate suggested it was not for the uninitiated.

Behind any explanation might be echoes of travelers' tales from the rain forests, of form-changing witch doctors, of men who might sometimes be jaguars or other beasts, or who might not. On the borders where folk magic and the modern world meet are many ambiguities, half reality, half hallucination.

But what happened to poor, wretched Emil Ennerson was no hallucination. Whatever the nature of his transformation into Michelle Passano, it depended on a living puppet master. With Dr. Caballa's death came the ultimate unmasking.

Jean stood up and came over to me, interrupting my reverie.

"Come on, Fidel," she said firmly. "The case is closed. Tomorrow there will be others — but meanwhile it is a lovely evening. Let's stroll down to Clara's for a quiet celebration and let Mandagorria take care of itself."

Which is what we did.

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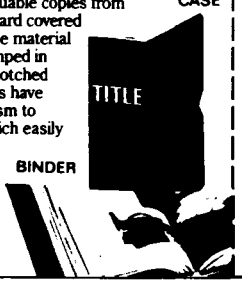

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Chet Williamson wrote the witty "A Matter of Sensitivity" (January 1985), but in "Play Dead" he switches from humor to horror to bring us a tale of preternatural talents suddenly discovered . . .

Play Dead

BY
CHET WILLIAMSON

The little man was decomposing.

At first, Tom Noraty thought that Stevie had gotten some green crayon on the figure, but when he tried to wipe it off, Tom felt a yielding softness to the plastic that made his mouth pucker, as if he'd just stepped in something rotten. He looked at the trace of green on his finger and rubbed it. It thinned and spread, like jelly. He sniffed at it, made another face, and washed it off his hand in the bathroom sink.

Tom picked up his son's toy again and looked at it, frowning. All it was was a three-inch-high plastic skin diver, with movable arms and legs and a noddable head. But it looked different somehow. Bigger? Yes, he was sure that was it. Not longer, but thicker.

Bloated.

He squeezed it again. It felt as though the plastic had softened from heat, but not become hard again on cooling. Something viscous, green-yellow in color, oozed out the left armhole of the painted wet suit. Tom dropped the toy.

"Stevie!" he called. The boy's footsteps came pounding up the stairs, and he stood in the bathroom door, smiling in four-year-old excitement at the intensity of his father's cry. "Stevie," Tom said, trying to answer the smile, "what did you do to your skin diver?"

Stevie craned his neck and looked at the figure in the tub. "Oh no," he said in a singsong. "Aw, he drowned."

"Drowned?"

"You said he shouldn't go swimming without his tank on."

Tom had said that, jokingly, the previous night when they'd been playing with the shark boat during Stevie's

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bath. Stevie had enjoyed snapping the one-piece mask and tank on and off the figure and making him dive over the side, fighting the shark beneath the Sargasso Sea of Mr. Bubble, while Tom sat on the closed toilet seat and watched, thinking over and over again of how Donna should be there washing her son, tucking him in, the two of them listening to his prayers, kissing him good night.

But *she* was the one who had left, after all. *She* was the one who had gone back to the city, threatening that she'd be back for Stevie, lawyer at her side if necessary. No way to live, she'd said, miles from anyone, no friends for her, no playmates for the boy. But Tom had needed the solitude for his painting, and she had never understood that, had fought bitterly against the upstate house and, once there, had withered like a rose in November. It had been two weeks since she'd left them, but it felt like yesterday.

He'd expected Stevie to be upset, but he hadn't been, had only said, "Oh," when Tom told him Donna had gone. Then he'd asked for a cookie. Tom lived in fear, waiting for the eventual reaction — tantrums, tears, glum silence, sickness — but so far there had been nothing.

Until now. Until the skin diver.

"You didn't empty the tub, Daddy. You should've emptied the tub right away. I think that's probably why he drowned."

"Look, honey, tell me the truth, O.K.?" I won't be mad. Did you do anything to him?"

"Like what?"

"Well, like put him in real hot water or right by the heater or anything?"

"No. I didn't."

"All right. You go play. I'll get your bath ready in a little while."

"Are we gonna bury him? Have a funeral?"

"Well, I don't know. We'll see. O.K.?"

"O.K." He turned and ran back to the playroom.

Tom gingerly picked up the little man and squeezed gently. More of the puslike fluid exuded from the folds of the wet suit. *Goddamned toy*, he thought, carrying it downstairs to the kitchen. He'd write the manufacturers and give them hell. Something in the plastic, no doubt. He slipped it into a plastic bag and took it into the den, where he put it in the rolltop desk and forgot about it.

The next morning he noticed an odd smell when he opened the curtains of Stevie's room. It was sharp and sour, slightly fecal in nature, and he quickly found that it came from Stevie's bed.

Oh Christ, here it comes. He doesn't cry, he doesn't get mad, but he protests the absence of his mommy by crapping in bed. Damn her.

Tom first looked under the pillow. Stevie's pajamas were there, where

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he always put them, and Tom picked them up with the tip of finger and thumb, turning them over in his hand, looking for telltale stains. But to his surprise and relief, they were clean. The sheets, then.

He tossed back the rumpled bedclothes and looked. Nothing. Nothing except a small lump at the very foot of the bed. Stripping the covers, he revealed a teddy bear that Stevie had had since he was two. Beside it, where it's soft brown legs met its torso, there was a sickly looking smear of something thick and brown, from which the smell emanated. Tom took the bear by one ear and turned it over. His stomach tightened.

The shiny button eyes were now dulled, their former amber a murky gray-green. The felt nostrils, cut and glued onto the snout, were puckered, actually drawn into the brown, fuzzy surface so that only bits of black remained. The soft cheeks were unnaturally full.

Tom made himself dip a finger into the hardening brownness that stiffened the sheet, and lifted it to his nose. The scent was foul, unmistakable.

"Stevie!" he shouted, annoyed at the way his voice shook. "Stevie!" Holding the teddy bear, he went through the house looking for his son.

The sound of Muppets guided him to the playroom, where Stevie was gazing entranced at "Sesame Street."

"Hey, buddy," Tom said, "turn that off a minute, huh?"

"But it's Bert and Ernie, Daddy. . . ." The boy's protest stopped as he saw what Tom was holding. "Aw no. Aw, Teddy."

"What happened, buddy?"

"Aw, Daddy, aw, he suffa. . . ." He butchered the word.

"Suffocated?"

"Yeah. He got down at the bottom of the bed. Sometimes he gets down to the bottom of the bed, but he never suffocated before. Aw. . . ."

"Did you . . . smell him this morning?"

"I thought it was me. I thought it was little poots." A euphemism for breaking wind that Donna hated.

"Have you been, uh . . . have you had any trouble with your bottom? Holding it or anything?"

Stevie looked as offended as a four-year-old could. "I'm a *big* boy, Daddy."

Tom nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, sure you are." He looked at the bear and noted with distaste and alarm that something thick and light brown was oozing from its head, dripping onto the wood floor. He made a hurt sound and grabbed a magazine from a nearby rack to hold under it. What in Christ's name were they making toys of these days? "I'm, uh, going to have to throw Teddy away, O.K.? I mean, he's no good now."

"Can't we bury him? And the frogman?"

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"Honey, look, they're not really . . . *dead.* They're, uh, there's just something wrong with them."

Stevie shook his head. "No, no, Daddy, they're dead. That's why they're rotten, y'know?"

"Yeah. Well, look, even if they are, you don't bury toys. Now I'll take care of them. You watch 'Sesame Street,' O.K.?"

Tom left the room and went into the little basement workshop, closing the door behind him. *What the hell did they stuff this thing with? Something organic, for Christ's sake?* He threw the bear on the stained and splintered workbench, and turned on the overhead light. The bear hit the bench with a smacking solidity he had not expected, and when he picked it up again, he noticed that it *was* heavier than it had been. He fished a penknife from his pocket, opened it, and held it above the soft plush, then paused.

What if there was something unpleasant inside, he wondered, thinking about how the bear could conceivably be heavier. And in a moment he had it, or thought he did.

Mice.

It was an old house, and he knew damned well they had mice in the cellar. So what if a mouse had gnawed its way in (*and couldn't they get in the smallest places, by God?*) and died in there? It wasn't impossible, was it? Or what if it had had its litter there, and Stevie had moved the teddy while the mother was away from its knickerbocker nest? The young would have died damned fast . . . and with the heat at the bottom of Stevie's so well tucked-in bed . . . was it any wonder they'd gone bad so quickly?

The knife was still poised over the brown, slightly swollen torso of the bear, when Tom remembered the teeth-grating grotesquerie of featherless birdlings fallen from their nests, lying still and maggoty, both pitiful and nauseating in their fragile nudity. Whenever he thought of abortion, he pictured these dead things barely free of their eggs, rather than any human fetuses. And what would *these* look like? Didn't most mammalian fetuses look similar? Would he cut the teddy open only to have a horde of human-looking *things* pour out?

And, oh shit . . . oh shit, what if they're not all dead? What if they wiggle or open little mouths or wave tiny paws like little hands in the air?

He tasted bile, swallowed, and cleared his throat. "Fuck it," he whispered. "Ah, fuck it." Having to know, he dug in the knife.

The blade caught, ripped, sank into wetness that seeped out to color his knuckle and the plush a deep red, and gritted off something hard, thick, bony.

Bony.

Tom stood perfectly still, the skewered bear still in his hand, a hand that was being slowly covered with blood.

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Somehow he knew that the fear, the danger, the whatever the hell this was all about was *not* there in his hand, and when he could move again, he swung his head around and looked behind him.

He was alone. The door was closed.

The teddy bear bled. The room stank of captured corruption freed.

He looked down again, wondering in absurd practicality what would remove the blood from the workbench. Then he lay the creature down, withdrew the knife, and began to make more cuts.

"Oh God, oh God," he whispered as the skin (*God, skin!*) was laid back and the interior revealed, the primitive interpretation, like a child's crayon drawing made flesh, of what was inside a living being. *A heart — oh yes, here's a heart* — whose blood now drenched the workbench, dropping in a soft, constant cadence onto the concrete floor; *Jesus, lungs,* big, pouchy sacks now emptied, the gray-green of an ancient bruise; *and guts — will you look at the guts!* — loops and strings galore (*he saw me clean a rabbit that time, he saw me*) of dull red and yellow, pale shimmering blues and pastel greens; and he wondered how it could have held so much.

Viscera. The stuff of life, but now dead. Organic matter withering, festering. Dead meat from what had been only cotton stuffing, nutshells, Styrofoam pellets.

His mind screamed for rationalizations. A combination of elements, he thought, like in the sci-fi stories he'd read when he was a kid. *Cotton and nutshells are organic, dammit, and Styrofoam is full of chemicals, right? So — given the right temperature, the right humidity —*

It all came together and made a heart and lungs and bones and guts inside a toy. Sure it did.

With Stevie as the catalyst.

Genesis Elementaria. The preschooler as God.

Stupid! he shrieked inside. It might as easily be nightmare, hallucination. Was the blood real? Did he see it at all, or was it only imagination? He lowered a finger into the open mass of organs, touched, prodded, and did not think about hallucination again.

But he *did* think about the skin diver.

When he opened the rolltop, the smell was already leaking through the plastic bag, pungent, sickly sweet. He took the bag down to the workshop, opened it, and slid the toy out to lie in the bear's puddle of blood. The diver lay on his back, arms and legs as stiff as ever, but his pale flesh was now a light green, and his painted eyes were hollow, sunken down into his head.

Tom flipped the toy over with a screwdriver. The visible backside of the little body — arms, legs, and neck — were a dark rust color. *The blood settled,* Tom thought. *Lying on his*

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back. Gravity. The blood settled. He took up the knife, ready to explore.

Like the bear's plush, the outer covering of the diver remained the same. Despite the discoloration, the plastic skin was still unbroken, and the wet suit as well was still firm. But Tom pressed down hard, and the blade entered all at once, sending up a jet of nearly black blood, and releasing a small cloud of rank gases that made him turn away and force down the lump that rose in his throat.

When the smell had dissipated, he spread the wound he had made and began to dissect. The interior was similar to the bear's, only smaller, more delicate. The lungs were swollen, bright blue in color, and when his knife blade clumsily nicked one open, water ran out in a tiny stream.

"Aw, he drowned. . . ."

Oh Jesus, what has she done to him? What's that bitch done . . . ?

Then he remembered. There were more toys, more plastic and rubber and cloth and wood representations of living things. . . . Stevie's room was full of them. A child amassed such things as easily as dust balls gathered under a bed. There must be dozens.

And he thought of the Fort Apache set he'd bought Stevie on his last birthday, of the Fisher-Price airport and farm and garage and firehouse, all with their assortment of plastic pilots and fireman and Indians and soldiers and dogs and cows and. . . .

Not dozens. Hundreds.

He took the stairs two at a time and ran through the house, slowing as he passed the room where "One two three *four* five, six seven eight *nine* ten, eleven tweh-eh-eh-eh-eh-ehlve!" blared from the TV in syncopated counterpoint to Stevie's vocal renditions. Tom finally stopped at the door of the boy's room, his eyes taking in the shelves and shelves of toys, his brain expecting them to start moving, start climbing down and doing . . . what?

But they were still, and he entered, reaching up, took Curious George with his yellow shirt and baseball cap and blind black monkey's eyes off a shelf, and squeezed him.

Nothing. Soft stuffing. No liquid yielding, no shifting of thrown-together organs. His thumb met the opposite pressure of his index finger through the layer of cloth and batting, rubbed together, and felt only the soft texture of cotton strands.

Then he couldn't bring them to life. But he could bring them to death.

Somewhere in the house the phone rang, and the jangling made him jump. He got to the kitchen by the fourth ring, Curious George still in his hand. It was Donna. "I've been trying to get hold of you," she said.

"I had the phone off the hook. I've been working."

"That's no excuse to cut yourself off, especially when you know damn well I'd try to reach you."

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"You know I need quiet when I work. . . ."

"Horseshit," she interrupted. "And *I* need my *son*."

"Then why didn't you take him with you when you stormed out of here?"

"Come off it, Tom. You were acting like a lunatic. I was afraid you'd . . . hit me or something."

Kill? Was she going to say kill? "That's ridiculous."

"I want to see him."

"What else do you want?"

"What?"

"A divorce? You want a divorce?"

There was silence on her end. "I don't know. I just want to think. And I want to see Stevie."

"Stevie's. . . ." He couldn't tell her. He couldn't begin to explain. "I don't want him going to that shithole of a city, Donna."

"And *I* don't want him to become a goddamn little *monk* up there in the Catskills!"

Bitch. "Come see him here."

He could tell she was seething. "All right. Tomorrow. I'll take him down into Cobleskill."

"I'll come with you."

"For God's sake, Tom, I'm not going to *kidnap* him! I'll be there around eleven. We'll talk then." She hung up without saying good-bye.

He marveled at how quickly love could turn to dislike, anger, hate. And he did hate her, hated her for not supporting him, for leaving him, for doing what she had done to Stevie. For he was sure it was the absence of his mother, the feeling of desertion, the sense of the rift between his parents that had brought his odd and chilling power into existence. What had Fort called them? Wild talents? Tom had read one of his books in college and had laughed at most of it. But now. . . .

What *other* talents did Stevie have?

Donna. She should be the one on that workbench, sprawling and gutted. The thought came unexpectedly, its strength frightening. *She'll bleed me dry. Take Stevie and bleed me dry.*

Like the blood on his hands even now.

"Stevie!" he called, going to the boy.

Stevie had just turned off "Sesame Street." "Bert had on his pigeons today."

"Oh yeah, terrific. Look, Stevie. . .."

"*Three* of 'em."

". . . you wanta play a game?"

"Fantasy Forest?" Stevie's eyes gleamed.

"No. How about Spaceman?"

"How do you play Spaceman?"

"Well, you and I are spacemen. And we're buddies, see? And we're looking for the fish creatures from . . . from Venus."

"A *fish* creature?"

"Yeah. And he's disguised as a fish, see, because it's easier."

" 'Cause he *looks* like a fish," the boy suggested, "more than like a person!"

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"That's *right*!" Tom answered excitedly. "Any you know where I think he *is*?"

"No! Where?"

"In my *studio*!"

"*Really*?" Tom's studio was off-limits to Stevie. There were paintings whose sexual content was far beyond the understanding of a four-year-old boy. But it was not the paintings that piqued Stevie's interest as much as the small aquarium Tom had bought to relax himself by gazing at its drifting denizens.

"Yes. In my *studio*!"

"You know something? I bet those fish men are hiding in your *'quarium*!"

"No!" Tom said in mock surprise. "You think so?"

" 'Sguised as *fish*!"

"Let's look. Keep your blaster ready. Those fish men are pretty dangerous." Tom started up the stairs, his son behind him, one hand on the banister, the other holding out a clenched fist, as though clutching the butt of a blaster. They passed the second-floor landing and kept going up — to the third floor, to the huge attic room that had been converted into the studio. Tom opened the door and whispered, "Shhh. . . ."

The room was nearly dark, gray dusk weighing on the skylight. In one corner a turquoise light gleamed, aerators bubbled softly, small luminous forms drifted as if over the surface of a painting come to life and light. "Aha!" said Tom, his heart pounding. "What's *that*?"

"The fish men!" replied Stevie in a stage whisper.

"You sure?"

"Yeah! Oh yeah!" he cried impatiently.

"Then blast 'em!" Tom shouted, falling into a prone position.

"*Bzzz! Bzzz!*" Stevie thrust his blaster hand forward. "*Bzzz!*"

"Attaboy! *Zap! Bzzapapapa!*"

For half a minute, father and son ravaged the Venusian hordes. Then throats tired and fingers ached, and silence fell over the room.

"We get 'em?" Stevie asked.

"I don't know." Tom wanted to look, but was afraid to.

'Lemme see. . . ."

"No!" he said, grabbing the boy's arm. "Uh . . . I'll check. They're dangerous when they're wounded."

He crossed the room as if in the thick air of dreams, and halfway to the tank realized that the absence of motion had been no illusion. Where were they? Vanished? Vaporized by fantasy blasters?

He had to look into the tank from above before he saw them floating on top of the water, a silvery layer of fish, their multicolored fins and crests and tails already losing their vibrancy, their eyes dulling in death.

Oh my son, my master, he thought wildly. *Little Siva. Deathbringer.*

Tom Noraty turned and looked at Stevie, who was trying to shorten the

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distance to his father with wide eyes and sprouting neck, wanting to see, perhaps, what made his father tremble. Tom pressed his teeth together so that his jaw muscles broadened his face; then he forced a smile and approached his son.

"We got 'em," he said, making himself ruffle the boy's hair. "Earth is safe again."

Over dinner he told Stevie that his mother was coming to see him in the morning. Stevie smiled at the news and told Tom that he would like to play Spaceman with her. Tom replied that they would certainly do so. "We'll pretend Mommy's a woman from Mars," Tom heard himself saying. "We'll surprise her when she comes, O.K.? You can pretend to zap her. Oh, I bet she'll laugh. . . ."

"She'll think it's *funny*!" the boy giggled.

Tom had a bad night, loving the memories of his wife, hating her in the present, unable to see her in any acceptable future. He considered the shock to Stevie of seeing his mother die even as the boy pretended in all innocence to destroy her. How long, he wondered, would Stevie feel guilt, have nightmares, cry at every thought of Mommy? *Children forget.* He was young; it would fade. *Children forget.*

Tom rolled over again and let his face fall against the pillow. *It's the only way. I won't let her take him. Not anything. Not anything I've worked for.* Driving his anger ahead of him, he twisted his way into sleep.

In the morning he was the first to hear the car in the driveway. Stevie was watching Saturday cartoons, and Tom ran into the room, switched off the set, and said, "Mommy's here," with feigned glee.

"Oh great!"

"Now remember," Tom told him, each word biting into him as he spoke it, "you're a spaceman, right? And Mommy's from Mars. . . ."

"Yeah! Mars!"

"So what are you gonna do, Spaceman Stevie?"

"*Zap* her! Ha-ha! She'll laugh, Daddy!"

"Yeah, she sure will. O.K., go see Mom!"

Stevie ran from the room, down the hall, into the vestibule, through the front door. He darted down the walk just as Donna stepped from the car. Watching from the window, Tom saw her broad grin, her arms going out, and wished for a blinding moment that he could stop it, but it was far too late.

Stevie's arm went up, fist clenched; and through the thick pane, Tom heard, as if very far away, "Zap! *Zap*! Gotcha, Mommy!"

Tom waited for her to fall.

But Donna only stood there, a tolerant, loving, curious smile on her face; and in another second, Stevie was in her arms and they were both laughing, a mother and son whose separation was joyously ended.

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Tom stood at the window, unable to move, and watched them get into the car and drive away. He felt totally lost, like a child whose dearest fantasy had ended at last — the Santa suit found in the attic, the colored Easter eggs already in the refrigerator in a large covered bowl pushed back behind the leftovers. He had — *dammit, dammit, oh goddammit* — believed, and now that belief was shattered.

But what was the answer, then? The reason? Coincidence? The fish, maybe. But not the teddy bear, not the skin diver. Stevie had done that, hadn't he? Hadn't he? What *else,* for God's sake. . . .

Wait.

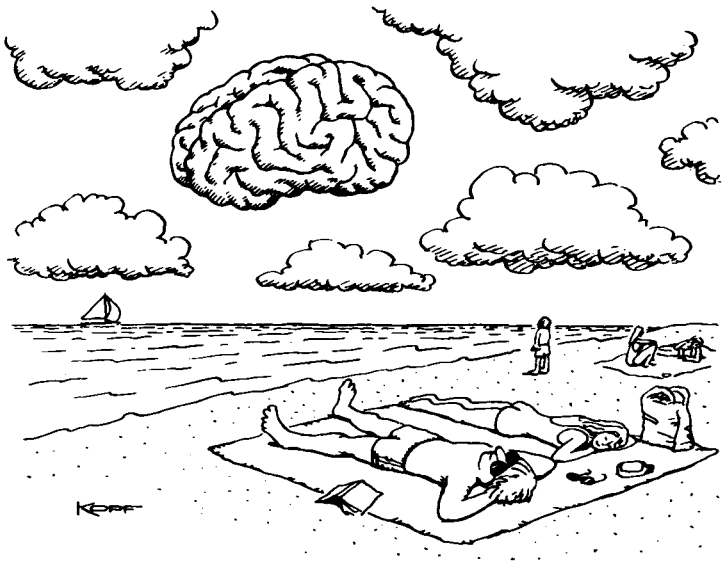
The skin diver. The bear. The fish.

And he understood. The skin diver, drowning in the water *he* had not let out of the tub. The bear, smothering because *he* had tucked the covers in very tightly to seal Stevie's warmth. The fish, which they *both* had zapped with their invisible blasters, their imaginations, and more.

And who is to say that only children have wild talents?

A fearful denial leapt up in him, only long enough for him to turn to the full-length closet mirror, to think how foolish he was to believe any of this, and to point his finger at his reflection with a childlike bravado and say softly, "Zap."

The fist gripped his heart, gripped and tightened, and would not let go.



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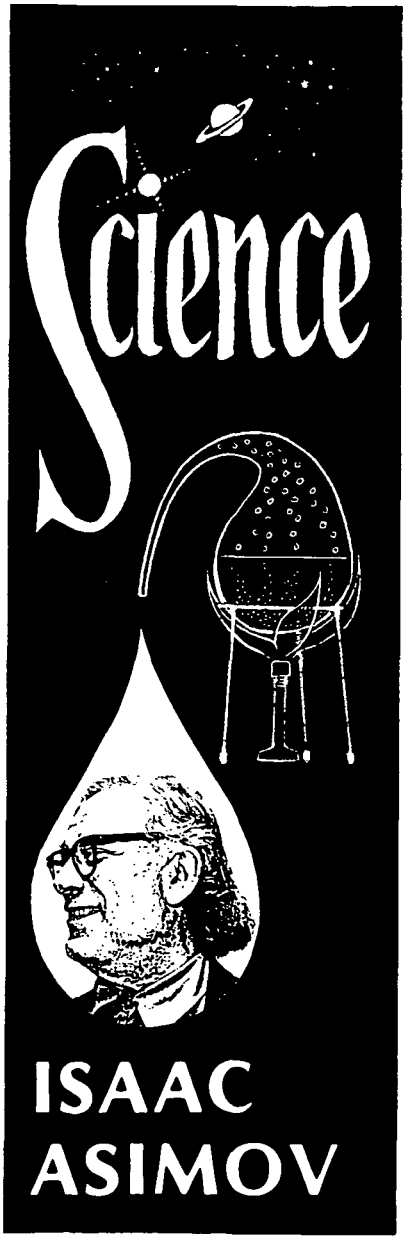

SUPER-EXPLODING STARS

Last week, my dear wife, Janet, took me to an old mansion of colonial origin right here in Manhattan. I wouldn't have believed that any such relic remained on this island, but there it was. We paid a small sum (well worth it), signed the visitor's book, and were shown through by a very pleasant woman.

When we were almost done, another woman approached diffidently. She was carrying paperbacks of my first three Foundation novels. (I can recognize my own books in any edition as far as I can see them.)

"Dr. Asimov?" she said.

I said, "Yes, ma'am?"

She said, "My son is a great fan of yours, and when I saw your name in the visitors' book, I called him up and said I thought you were in the house, but that I couldn't be sure which one you were. He said, 'Is there someone there with big white sideburns?' I said, 'Yes, there is.' He said, 'That's Dr. Asimov,' and he brought over these books."

So I signed them.

I always say that I have three trademarks: my bolo ties, my dark-rimmed glasses, and my white sideburns. However, anyone can wear bolo ties and dark-rimmed glasses. It's the white sideburns that really give me away because so few people care to sport such facial adornments. Fortunately, I am an unself-conscious, extraverted

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individual, and I don't mind being recognized, so I don't intend to shave them off.

At the time of this incident, as it happens, I already knew I was going to be writing this essay in order to conclude the subject I had been discussing in the previous two, and it occurred to me that I was going to be discussing a star that, in a sense, gave away the Andromeda Nebula, as my sideburns gave me away. Let me explain—

I pointed out in the previous essay that, early in the 20th Century, there was a controversy concerning the Andromeda Nebula. There were those who thought it a huge and very distant collection of individually invisible stars, lying far outside our own Galaxy. If so, the Andromeda Nebula was certainly one of many such objects, and the Universe was therefore far larger than astronomers generally realized it was as the 20th Century opened.

There were others who thought that our Galaxy (plus the Magellanic Clouds) did indeed make up essentially all of the Universe, and that the Andromeda Nebula, and all other such bodies, were relatively small and nearby clouds of dust and gas, existing inside our own Galaxy. Some even thought that such nebulas represented single planetary systems in the process of development.

In the argument between the "far-Andromedas" and the "near-Andromedas" (my own names for the two sides), the near-Andromedas seemed to have won the game hands-down. The key pieces of evidence were the photographs of the Andromeda Nebula, taken over the years, that seemed to show it to be rotating at a detectable speed. If it were far outside our own Galaxy, any motion would be immeasurably small, so that any detection of measurable rotation meant that it had to be a nearby object.

That left one undecided problem. As I explained in the previous essay, a star had appeared in the Andromeda Nebula in August, 1885, and was referred to as "S Andromedae." Since it appeared where no star had been detected before, and since it had gotten too dim to see after seven months, it was a nova. It was, however, the dimmest nova that had ever been detected, for even at its brightest, it had reached only the very borderline of naked-eye visibility. It very likely would never have been detected at all, had it not appeared right in the middle of the blank fog of the Andromeda Nebula.

No one paid very much attention to it at the time, but as the con-

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troversy over the Andromeda Nebula grew hot, S Andromedae took center stage. If the nova were actually located *in* the Nebula, then the Nebula was not likely to be a mere cloud of dust and gas. It was more likely to be a cluster of very dim stars, in which one star exploded and grew bright enough to make out with a telescope. That would be a strong point in favor of the far-Andromeda view.

The catch to this argument was that there was no way of showing that S Andromedae was actually part of the Andromeda Nebula. It might merely be a star that existed in the *direction* of the Nebula, but was much closer to us than the Nebula was. Since we don't see the sky three-dimensionally, a nearby S Andromedae that happened to be in the direction of the Andromeda Nebula would seem to our eyes to be part of the Nebula even though it wasn't.

But if the Andromeda Nebula were comparatively close and S Andromedae was closer still, why should it have been so dim?

Well, why not? There are lots of nearby stars that are dim. Barnard's Star is only 6 light-years away (only the Alpha Centauri system is nearer), and yet Barnard's Star can only be seen by telescope. One of the stars of the Alpha Centauri system itself, Alpha Centauri C, or "Proxima Centauri" (discovered in 1913) is the nearest of all known stars, yet is far too dim to be seen by the unaided eye.

There are many very dim stars, and S Andromedae might well be one of them and might be none too bright even when it became a nova — so the near-Andromedas still had the best of it.

But then came 1901 when, as I mentioned in the previous essay, Nova Persei flashed out, the brightest nova in three centuries. As it happened, the telescope showed a cloud of gas and dust around it and a circle of illumination seemed to be spreading outward with time. Astronomers felt it was light travelling outward from the star and illuminating the dust farther and farther outward. The actual speed of light was well known, and from the apparent speed with which light was expanding outward, it was easy to estimate the distance of the nova. Nova Persei turned out to be about 100 light years away.

That's not very far, only about 25 times as far away as the nearest star. No wonder Nova Persei appeared so bright.

What, then, if all novas, in exploding, ended up having about the same luminosity? They might all be of equal apparent brightness if all were at equal distance but, since they were probably at wildly unequal

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distances, those which were closer were brighter.

In that case, if S Andromedae reached the same luminosity at its peak that Nova Persei did, and was as dim as it seemed only because of its greater distance, that distance could be calculated. Then, if S Andromedae were not actually part of the Andromeda Nebula, that meant the Nebula must be farther away still, perhaps much farther away.

The far-Andromeda view brightened slightly, but not very much. After all, this argument rested on a very shaky underpinning. What right had anyone to make the assumption that all novas reached about the same luminosity? There was no compelling reason to suppose this. It was just as reasonable to suppose that faint stars gave rise to faint novas and that S Andromedae was a very faint star. It might be closer than Nova Persei and yet be much fainter in its nova stage.

The near-Andromeda side still seemed to have the better of it.

One American astronomer was stubbornly far-Andromeda in his belief, and he refused to accept this last argument.

He was Hebert Doust Curtis (1872-1942). He began his academic life by studying languages and becoming a teacher of Latin and Greek. The college he taught at had a telescope, however, and Curtis grew interested in it, and then in astronomy, which he had never studied in school. In 1898, he switched careers and became an astronomer, getting his Ph.D. in the subject in 1902.

In 1910, he was put to work on nebular photography and, naturally, he was drawn into the controversy over whether the nebulae were distant objects beyond the Galaxy or were nearby objects.

One of the arguments in favor of thinking the nebulae to be part of our Galaxy was this:

If they were outside our Galaxy, then they should be scattered all over the sky indiscriminately, since there seemed no reason why they should be in one direction rather than in another. In actual fact, though, the nebulae were found in greater and greater numbers the farther one explored away from the line of the Milky Way. This, it was argued, showed that the nebulae were likely part of the Galaxy, since objects within our Galaxy might not form near the Milky Way for some reason or other, whereas objects outside our Galaxy should have no reason in the world for being influenced, one way or the other, by some feature within our Galaxy.

Curtis, however, in photographing the various nebulae, noticed that

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many of them, on the outskirts of their flattened-pancake shape possessed dark, opaque clouds.

It seemed to Curtis that the outer rim of our own Galaxy (marked off by the Milky Way) might also have dark opaque clouds and, indeed, a number of them could be seen in the Milky Way. Curtis argued, therefore, that the nebulae were indeed distributed evenly over the sky, but that the dark clouds in the neighborhood of the Milky Way hid many of them and made it *seem* there were more of them far from the Milky Way than near it.

And if that were so, then this particular argument for having the nebulae part of our Galaxy bit the dust, and Curtis's far-Andromeda views were strengthened.

He next began to reason thus— The Andromeda Nebula was the largest nebulae and the brightest (next to the Magellanic Clouds, which existed just outside our Galaxy and were its satellites, so to speak). Except for the Magellanic Clouds, the Andromeda Nebula was the only one visible to the unaided eye. This probably meant that it was the closest Nebula outside the Magellanic Clouds and was the most likely to give observing astronomers important detail.

If, then, the Andromeda Nebula was a very distant collection of stars, so distant that the component stars could not be individually seen, those stars would be more nearly individually visible than the stars of any other nebula. It would follow that if one of the stars of the Andromeda Nebula brightened as a nova would, it might become visible, and that this would account for S Andromedae. This might not be true of farther nebulae where individual stars would be entirely too faint for even novas to become visible.

Beginning in 1917, then, Curtis began a careful and persistent series of observations of the Andromeda Nebula to see if he could find other novas — and he did. He found that stars appeared and then disappeared, dozens of them. That they were novas was unquestionable, but they were amazingly dim. They could just barely be made out by his telescope. This was to be expected if the Andromeda Nebula were truly far away.

Could it be, though, that Curtis was merely seeing very faint novas in the direction of the Andromeda Nebula and that none of them were actually *in* the Nebula? If that were so, the Nebula might still be merely a cloud of dust and gas.

To Curtis, however, that seemed quite out of the question. Nowhere

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else in the sky could one find such a crowd of very faint novas in a small area equivalent to that covered by the Andromeda Nebula. As a matter of fact, there were more novas seen in the direction of the Nebula than in all the rest of the sky put together. There was simply no reason why this should be if the Andromeda were merely an unremarkable cloud of dust and gas.

The only logical explanation was that the novas were in the Andromeda Nebula and that their great number was merely a reflection of the far vaster number of stars, generally, that existed there. In other words, the Andromeda Nebula was a galaxy like our own and, in that case, it must lie very far away. Its great distance, then, would account for the extraordinary faintness of the novas.

Curtis became the outstanding astronomical spokesman for the idea of the far-Andromeda.

But what about the key observation that supported the near-Andromeda idea: the fact that the Andromeda Nebula was observed to rotate. That rested on 19th Century observations that might be questionable, but in the early 20th Century, the observation was strengthened.

At just about the time that Curtis was detecting novas in the Andromeda Nebula, a Dutch-American astronomer, Adriaan van Maanen (1884-1946), was carefully observing nebulae and checking their apparent rotation. He was working with better instruments and making better observations than his predecessors had, and he reported that he had definitely detected a measurable rate of rotation in the Andromeda Nebula, and in several other nebulae as well.

What it amounted to was this— If Curtis had truly detected faint novas in the Andromeda Nebula, then it was simply impossible that van Maanen had actually detected a very tiny speed of rotation for the Nebula. And if van Maanen had actually detected rotation of the Nebula, then it was simply impossible that Curtis had detected numerous faint novas in it. The two observations were mutually exclusive; which should one believe?

No clear decision could be made. Both Curtis and van Maanen were observing something that was at the very limits of observation. In either case, a very slight error in the instrument or in the observer's judgement might wipe out the observation. This was all the more true since both astronomers were detecting something they very much wanted to detect and were sure they would detect. Even the most honest and scrupulous scientist could be swayed into observing something that wasn't

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there to observe if he were emotionally motivated to observe it. So although only one of the two could be correct, there seemed to be no way of deciding which one it might be.

One of the most prominent American astronomers of the time was Harlow Shapley (1885-1972). It was Shapley who had worked out the true vastness of our Galaxy (indeed, he had overestimated its size somewhat) and had shown that our Sun was not at its center but was located in the outskirts.

Perhaps, as the enlarger of the Galaxy, Shapley didn't quite like the notion of finding the Universe to contain a great many galaxies, thus reducing our own to insignificance again. It is difficult, however, to argue psychological motivations, and probably unfair. Shapley also had objective reasons to favor the near-Andromeda idea.

Shapley was a very close and long-time friend of Van Maanen, and an admirer of his astronomical work. It was only natural, then, for Shapley to accept van Maanen's observations of the rotation of the Andromeda Nebula. So did most of the astronomical community, and Curtis found himself in a minority.

On April 26, 1920, Curtis and Shapley held a well-publicized debate on the matter before a crowded hall at the National Academy of Sciences. Since Shapley was far better known than Curtis was, the astronomers in the audience expected the former to have no trouble in establishing his point of view.

Curtis, however, was an unexpectedly effective speaker, and his novas, in their dimness and their number, proved a surprisingly powerful argument.

Objectively, the debate should have been considered a stand-off, but the fact that Curtis had not been demolished, but had actually held the champion to a draw, was an astonishing moral victory. As a result, there developed a steadily growing opinion that Curtis had won the debate.

He did, in fact, win over a number of astronomers to the far-Andromeda viewpoint, but scientific issues are not settled by victory in debate. Neither Curtis's nor van Maanen's observations were sufficiently compelling to end the controversy. Something else was needed, new and better evidence.

The man who supplied it was the American astronomer Edwin Powell Hubble (1889-1953). He had at his disposal a new, giant telescope with a mirror 100 inches in diameter — the most far-seeing anywhere in the world up to that time. It was put into use in 1919, and, in 1922, Hubble

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began to use it to make time exposure photographs of the Andromeda Nebula.

On October 5, 1923, he found, on one of these photographs, a star in the outskirts of the Andromeda Nebula. It was not a nova. He followed it from day to day, and it turned out to be the kind of star known as a "Cepheid variable." By the end of 1924, Hubble had found thirty-six very faint variable stars in the Nebula, twelve of them Cepheids. He also discovered sixty-three novas, much like those that Curtis had earlier detected, except that Hubble, with the new telescope, could see them more clearly and unmistakably.

Hubble reasoned, much as Curtis had done, that all these stars found in the direction of the Andromeda Nebula could not exist in the space between it and us. They had to exist within the Nebula, which therefore had to be a conglomeration of stars.

In fact, Hubble's discovery went beyond Curtis's in a crucial way. Cepheid variables can be used to determine distances (a technique that Shapley had used very effectively in measuring the dimensions of our own Galaxy). And now Hubble used that same technique to demolish Shapley's stand on the matter of the Andromeda Nebula, because the Cepheids he had detected made the Andromeda Nebula seem to be about 750,000 light-years away. (As a matter of fact, in 1942, the German-American astronomer Walter Baade (1893-1960) refined the technique of measurement by Cepheids and showed that the correct distance of the Andromeda Nebula was about 2,300,000 light-years.)

With that, the victory of the far-Andromeda view was complete. Van Maanen's observations had been wrong for some reason (perhaps instrument flaw), and no one has observed any measurable rotation in the Andromeda Nebula since. Indeed, from Hubble's time on, the structure has been named the Andromeda Galaxy, and the other "extra-galactic nebulae" have also come to be called galaxies.

But there remained a problem. It had been S Andromedae, you will recall, that had been the nagging question that had kept astronomers wondering about the Andromeda Nebula. That nova had cast doubt on the Nebula being a nearby object.

Now, however, that that matter was settled and astronomers spoke of the Andromeda Galaxy, S Andromedae became a puzzle in the other direction. Earlier, astronomers had wondered about its dimness; now they wondered about its brightness. The more than a hundred novas ob-

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served in the Andromeda Galaxy were all extremely dim. S Andromedae was millions of times brighter than they were — all but bright enough to be made out by the unaided eye. Why was that?

Again, there were two possibilities. One was that perhaps S Andromedae had indeed flared up in the Andromeda Galaxy, but it just happened to be a few million times more luminous than ordinary novas. That seemed so unreasonable that almost no astronomer would believe it. (However, Hubble did, and, at the time, his prestige was sky-high.)

The second possibility seemed more likely — that S Andromedae was not part of the Andromeda Galaxy, but, by a not impossible coincidence, lay in the same direction as that body. If it were only a thousandth as far as the Andromeda Galaxy, it would naturally seem millions of times as bright as the dim, dim novas that *were* part of that galaxy. Most astronomers took this view.

You can't, however, settle a dispute of this kind by majority vote. Once again, there had to be new and better evidence, one way or the other.

A Swiss astronomer, Fritz Zwicky (1898-1974), pondered the problem. Suppose S Andromedae were part of the Andromeda Galaxy and had blazed up with a fierce light a few million times brighter than any ordinary nova would exhibit. Suppose that, in other words, S Andromedae were not merely an exploding star, but a super-exploding star, or a "supernova" (to use a term that Zwicky himself introduced).

If so, there had been one supernova noted in the Andromeda Galaxy and *many* ordinary novas. That made sense, since anything that is an extreme in the direction of hugeness is bound to be far less numerous than things that are comparatively ordinary.

There was, therefore, little use in watching the Andromeda Galaxy, or any one galaxy, for another supernova. It could take decades, or centuries, to spot one in that way.

However, there were millions of distant galaxies so far away that ordinary novas could not possibly be detected under any conditions. Supernovas, on the other hand, would be seen in them. S Andromedae had shone with an intensity that was a respectably large fraction of all the light in the rest of the Andromeda Galaxy (provided S Andromedae had really been a part of that galaxy). If other supernovas were like S Andromedae they, too, would shine with the concentrated light of an entire galaxy, so that no matter how far off a galaxy might be, as long as it was close enough to be seen at all, a supernova within it would also be seen.

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Any one particularly galaxy might have a supernova only at rare intervals, but there might be supernovas showing up every year in one galaxy or another. An astronomer must therefore watch as many galaxies as possible and wait till he sees one of them (*any* one of them) which has grown a star as bright as itself that wasn't there before.

In 1934, Zwicky began a systematic search for supernovas. He focussed on a large cluster of galaxies in the constellation of Virgo and watched them all. By 1938, he had located no fewer than twelve supernovas, one in each of twelve different galaxies of the cluster. Each supernova, at its peak, was almost as bright as the galaxy of which it was part, and each one of them had to be shining (at its peak) with a luminosity that was billions of times that of our Sun.

Could this observation be deceptive? Could Zwicky have just happened to spot twelve ordinary novas that were much closer than the galaxies in which they seemed to exist, but that merely happened to be in the same direction as those galaxies?

No, that couldn't be. The twelve galaxies were very tiny patches in the sky, and to have twelve novas, each of which was located in precisely the same direction as one of those galaxies, would ask far too much of coincidence. It was much more sensible to accept the notion of supernovas.

Besides, additional supernovas were discovered in succeeding years by Zwicky and by others. By now, over 400 supernovas have been detected in various galaxies.

Is it possible, then, that some of the novas seen in our own Galaxy have been supernovas?

Yes, indeed. It is not likely that an ordinary nova would be so close to us as to shine with a light exceeding that of the planets. A supernova could do so easily, however, even if it were quite far away.

Thus, the really bright novas I described two months ago (NEW STARS, June 1987) must have been supernovas. That includes the nova of 1054, Tycho's nova of 1572, and Kepler's nova of 1604. .

The 1604 supernova was the most recent to have been visible in our own Galaxy. Since the development of the optical telescope, the spectroscope, the camera, the radio telescope, and the rocket, there have been *no* supernovas in our own Galaxy that we could see. (There may have been some on the other side of the Galaxy, where they would be hidden by the opaque obscuring clouds between us and the Galactic center.)

In fact, since 1604, the closest supernova we have experienced was

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S Andromedae, and that was a century ago and it was 2,300,000 light-years away.

While no sane person would wish a supernova to erupt too near the Earth, we would be safe enough if one erupted, say, 2,000 light-years away. In that case, astronomers would have a chance to study a supernova explosion in enormous detail, something they would dearly love to do.

Astronomers are, therefore, waiting for such an event, but that's all they can do — wait. And gnash their teeth, I suppose.

NOTE: Just a few weeks after I wrote this essay the longed for supernova appeared. It was not in our own Galaxy, to be sure, but it was in the Large Magellanic Cloud, the outside galaxy nearest to ourselves. An essay on the new supernova will appear in the November issue.

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Nuclear war is an ever-present threat in our world today, and starting such a war seems all too easy. This new story by Michael Armstrong, however, imagines a world in which detonating a "nuke" becomes a very difficult, personal decision. "The Verts Get a Nuke" comes from the forthcoming novel, AFTER THE ZAP, to be published by Warner Books.

The Verts Get A Nuke

BY

MICHAEL ARMSTRONG

The Wonderblimp got up above the storm and coasted with the lighter winds until the storm broke. After we had dumped all the gear we could spare and emptied the helium reserves, Nike told us to get some sleep. I had a hard time getting to sleep. I kept seeing Levi fall through that hole and kept feeling the cable slide through my hands and kept seeing that look on Levi's face when I lost him. Lucy came into my room, though, crept in through the door, and with fingers and hands and braid and a few other choice parts of her anatomy eased me into a semblance of slumber. We woke into cool calmness, about ten miles out of Kachemak. The Wonderblimp battered and bruised, and the crew tired, we came to do what Lucy said we were going to do: trade some nukes.

A long finger of land crooked out into the mouth of Kachemak Bay. Two knuckles out and at the fingertip were a bunch of gray wood buildings with garish painted roofs. The bright roofs against the blue and white and brown of Kachemak Bay made the buildings look like splatters of paint spilled in the dirt. I wondered if the town of Kachemak had some grudge against the bay, or if maybe bright colors kept the boredom of winter from oozing madness into the souls of its citizens.

The south edge of the bay disappeared behind us, a crinkly coast draped with glaciers. The north edge of the bay looked like a big wall, as if the Ultimate Creator had taken a chain saw and cut the rolling green hills off at the base, gently sloping beaches probably not being fashionable 100 million years ago.

There was another cluster of col-

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ored roofs at the base of the finger of land, and a hunk of buildings on a flat piece of land between the finger and the hills. There the hills did slope down, down into flat estuary, a lake, and some dry land. Little ponds of overflow dotted the lake, and other patches of ice were swept clean and shiny by the wind. There was an airfield with lots of dead planes on the edge of the lake; some of the planes had little pontoons on them — I guessed they had swept in too low over a canoe race or something.

The Wonderblimp flew along the finger of land and over the lake and to the airfield. From the promenade deck outside our cabin, Lucy and I watched the land slip below. Our big black shadow seemed to suck people out of their homes. The blimp would pass over a house, the thrum of our props rebounding off the hills, and as we came over, a knot of people would spill out the front door, pointing up at the blimp and waving.

When we had descended and hovered fifty feet over the old airport, there were probably two hundred people running onto the field, some on skis, some on dogsleds, some on horses, and a few in cars that looked like cars only in that they had four wheels. One car had a big draft horse in front. But the people didn't look like the people I'd seen down in Kodiak, or even down south.

"Verts," Lucy said. "Crazy Verts."

Verts was what they called themselves, Lucy explained, "Vert" meaning "truth" in one tongue and "green" in another, sort of. Green was a good word, for it seemed to be the color they liked best. God knows they didn't like brown or tan or gray or black.

Their hair didn't seem to be any color that nature had intended it to be, except maybe red, and the redheads there were a red that was far from auburn and closer to orange. The Verts had hair that was blue and purple and pink and puce and silver and white and mostly green, green more than any other color, green like fire trucks, green like leaves just uncurling from winter, green like life and hope and all that stuff.

They wore clothes that seemed to do only one thing in common, and that not really well at all: cover the body. Most of the Verts wore tights of some sort, and some sort of shirt or sweater, and boots of all shapes and colors, but draped over that basic arrangement were vests and blouses and capes and shirts and pants and kilts and all manner of clothing, all colors except brown, all styles except plain.

They milled around on the field below us like dots in a kaleidoscope, but the Verts left us an open field to land on. In the center of the open field was a narrow pyramid-shaped log structure about fifty feet high. It looked something like an oil derrick, like the derricks I'd seen — where *bad* I seen oil derricks? I asked my-

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self. Somewhere. Yeah, somewhere.

Lucy and I walked down to the hangar deck and helped Bron assemble what he called "the cone," exactly that: a four-foot-long cone on a round swiveling base about six feet in diameter, with the open end of the cone vertical to the base. The idea was that the cone would fit on top of the derrick, and a drogue on the nose of the blimp would fit into the open end of the cone and dock. Bron said that Wonderblimp had been passing messages up the Memor line telling folks how to build landing towers for the Wonderblimp, and the Verts had built one for us.

"But the jerks can't follow instructions," Bron said, staring out the port at the crude log-derrick the Verts had put up. "Still, I guess it will have to do."

Lucy cranked the hangar bay doors open while Bron and I hooked the cone up to a cable hanging from overhead. We snapped our monkey harnesses to the cable and jumped on the cone. Up on the bridge, Nike steered the blimp over to the Verts' derrick, then Lucy maneuvered the cone — and us — to the top of the derrick. Bron signaled Lucy to gently lower the cone on top of the derrick. To Bron's surprise, the base fit. Bron unhooked the cone from the cable and pointed at me to hook my monkey harness up to the derrick.

Bron took out a big bit-and-brace and started drilling holes through the rough-cut lumber of the derrick. He handed me a wrench and these funny-looking bolts, and told me to bolt the cone on. When all the holes were drilled, and all the bolts tightened, Bron turned the cone around on its base. The open end of the cone pointed out, and moved smoothly around the top of the derrick. A thick cable of wires came down from inside the cone, and Bron hooked a wire each up to little holes in the bolts.

"What are the wires for?" I asked.

"Explosive bolts," he said. "In case we have to blow the joint in a hurry. Don't want to leave our cone behind, do we?" Bron jumped up and down on the derrick and nodded. "She's solid enough," he said. "Climb on down and we'll bring the Wonderblimp in."

We went down the derrick, using a ladder the Verts had thankfully built into the structure. At the bottom, Bron walked around the base and made sure it was staked securely to the ground. The Verts stood around us, staring, but said nothing. Bron looked up at the blimp and held his arm straight up.

The Wonderblimp swung around, nose pointed straight for the cone on top of the tower, and then rammed into it, a perfect mate. The bottom of the nacelle was ten feet off the ground. Lucy cranked the gangplank down; the end hung short about three feet. Bron shrugged. I pointed to a group of Verts wheeling something

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up to the gangplank. It was a small platform, with steps in front and a rail all around. A tall man with a bright yellow wool cap stood on the platform. When the gang of Verts got the platform up to the gangplank, the platform fit perfectly. Bron smiled. The Wonderblimp was docked.

"MYERS" was stitched on the wool cap of the Vert on the platform. He stood, arms folded across his chest. Bron and I walked up the platform behind him and shoved our way by and up to Lucy. Lucy was at the top of the gangplank, waiting for Nike to come down.

The Myers guy was about six foot five, but thin, though his neck muscles had that tough-corded muscle look that meant thin, yes, but not weak. Curly red hair poked out from the edges of his cap, and he had a big beard down to his chest that matched the hair. I squinted and realized that that was his natural color — the only Vert around with real-looking hair. His clothes were simple, too: olive drab wool trousers, faded green canvas boots like Lucy's, what she called mukluks, and a bright orange anorak with fur trim dyed green. Strapped to his hip was a gun about the size of Bron's hand, a Japanese gun — Mitsubishi or Nissan or Subaru; they all looked the same. Hanging from his neck was a blue plastic whistle.

The Vert walked up to us and stopped about two feet away. He took the whistle and blew it, hard. The Verts had been milling around and talking and being basically unruly, but when that guy blew the whistle, they shut up and stopped right there. Dead silence.

"My name's Myers," he yelled. "And I have come to get my nuke. Who's givin' out nukes?" Myers walked up to me and stopped.

He looked right at me, brown eyes that could probably burn holes through lead. I looked back, then down at my feet, idly thinking about snow and how my sneakers were getting a little damp and stuff like that. Myers laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed, so I looked up. I smiled.

"You a Nuker?" he asked.

I held up my hands, left, right, so he could see that I didn't have the glove. "Uh, not really," I said. "But I—"

"No, you're not," he said. He looked at Lucy and got this big grin on his face. O.K., I could understand that grin. He took her gloved hand and stroked it. She smiled back. "*You're* a Nuker."

"Sure," she said. "You want a nuke?" Her braid slid around her waist and over to Myers's belt.

Myers turned around and looked at the Verts. "Do I want a nuke?" He pointed at himself. "*Do I want a nuke?*" The Verts chuckled. "Damn straight I want a nuke! You think we asked you here for a tea party? *Sure,* I want a nuke."

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"Then get your damn paws off me," Lucy said. That braid whipped up to her hand, and Myers looked down at what was poking his belly: his gun. He got this look on his face like a dog had just peed on his foot, then his mouth broke into a big grin. Lucy turned the pistol over and handed it back to him.

"Cute," he said. "Real cute. Uh, you the person who gives out nukes?"

Lucy nodded. "One of 'em."

"O.K.," he said. "What do I have to do to get a nuke?"

She smiled. "Come with me." She turned and walked into the blimp. Myers followed. Lucy stopped, looked back at me, and motioned with her left hand. "You too, Holmes."

We went up to the galley, where Nike and Bron were sitting around a table. In the middle of the table was a coffee thermos crudely painted fluorescent orange. Nike had a long form with all sorts of words on it. We made our introductions, shook hands, then sat down.

"So you want a nuke, eh?" Nike said to Myers.

Myers grinned. "You betcha."

"O.K.," said Nike. "This is how it works. You get a nuke under certain conditions. Holmes, read 'em." He passed the piece of paper to me. I cleared my throat and read. I was proud of that document — I'd the night before the storm, all the things I could remember about contracts and stuff like that.

"Agreement to Take Possession of One Small Nuclear Device," I read. "Whereas the party of the first part having been determined to have definite security needs, and the party of the second part having been determined to be able to provide for those needs, it is hereby—"

"Skip the crap, Holmes," Nike said. "Read the conditions."

"Aw, Nike, it's the best part," I said. I thought so, anyway.

"*Skip it,*" he said.

I bit my lip and looked down. "O.K.," I said quietly. "Um. . . . The aforementioned Recipient agrees to take possession of said nuclear device under these conditions:

"One: Recipient will provide the Order of the Atom with one nonfunctional nuclear device, a so-called 'knapsack' nuke, or ten kilograms of gold or cocaine, whichever is more available.

"Two: Recipient agrees that the use of said nuclear device will be limited to defense of life and property of the Recipient's group and that the said nuclear device will not be fired in aggression.

"Three: Recipient agrees to comply with any and all security procedures imposed by the Order to prevent the untimely or unlawful use of the nuclear device.

"Four: Recipient will release to the Order a temporary hostage — any

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direct blood relative of the Recipient — for a period of twenty-four hours, to ensure that adequate security measures are followed.

"Five: Recipient will also provide the Order with five hundred gallons of combustible fuel, either methanol, gasoline, or ethanol.

"That's it," I said. "There're some lines here for signatures."

"O.K. Thanks, Holmes." Nike turned to Myers. "Do you have any questions about these conditions?"

"Yeah. What's this about a hostage?"

"Well," said Nike, "when we release the nuke to you, we keep one of your direct blood relatives hostage for a day, just to keep you from trying any funny stuff."

Myers nodded. "You don't hurt them?"

Nike shook his head. "Oh no, of course not." He smiled.

"O.K.," Myers said. "You sure you don't hurt them?"

"Never," Nike said.

"All right, I guess," Myers said. "What about the fuel?"

"What about it?" Nike asked.

"Well, I mean — five hundred gallons. That's a lot. It will take us a few days to come up with it."

"What do you have to do?" Nike asked. "Shovel a little more shit?"

Myers nodded. "You got it. We've got a batch of methanol cooking, but it will take some time."

"A week?"

Myers shook his head. "Longer."

"A month?"

Myers nodded. "Maybe sooner."

Nike shrugged. "O.K. My crew could use a little leave. *Three weeks.* But sign the agreement now."

"All right. Three weeks," Myers said. "Where do I sign?"

"Put your chop right here," I said, pointing to a line at the bottom.

I handed Myers a fountain pen. Myers scrawled a mark — a large *M* — and then Nike handed me the paper to witness. I wrote "Myers" under his signature, and "His Mark," then signed my name on the line below. Nike scrawled a symbol that looked like a check mark. I wrote "His Mark, Nike, Captain, The Wonderblimp, and Most Reverend Brother, Order of the Atom" underneath his signature, tore off one copy of the agreement, and handed it to Myers.

"O.K.," Nike said. "Three weeks. You deliver the fuel, and then we'll set up the delivery of the nuke."

Myers stared at the coffee thermos. "Is that the nuke?"

Nike nodded. "That's the baby. Works like a dream." He waved it. "Go ahead, pick it up."

Myers grinned, put his hand around the thermos, lifted it, then set it back down. "Nice," he said. "*Nice.*" He nodded his head and grinned harder, till it looked like his lips would creep into his earlobes. "Yeah, real nice. O.K., guys. See you in a few weeks." He left with Bron.

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I stared at the thermos. That was the knapsack nuke? I thought. A coffee thermos? Lucy noticed me staring.

"What's the matter, Holmes?" she asked. "Haven't you ever seen a knapsack nuke before?"

"Uh, no," I said. "I mean, I guessed it was small . . . but a coffee thermos?"

She nodded. "Clever, eh?"

"Yeah," I said. "Who built it?"

"I did," she said. "My design. Oh, other people helped, but that nuke is all my work." She smiled.

I smiled. Like hell she built that nuke. But if that was her delusion . . . who was I to burst balloons?

Bron came back in with Doc North. Bron was carrying a little box, about the size of a paperback book.

"Lucy personally assembled every knapsack nuke ever made," Doc said. "She knows them backward and forward."

Right, I thought. "And that one works?" I asked.

"With some slight modifications," Lucy said. "You'll see." She glanced at Nike; he nodded.

"It's time, Holmes," Nike said.

"Time?"

"Time for your induction into the Order of the Atom."

"Induction?" I asked. "You mean I can stay? You're not booting me off here?"

"Nope," Nike said.

I glanced at Lucy. She smiled, reached under the table, and squeezed my hand. "Great," I said. "I think."

"You've done a good job reading," Nike said. "Your navigation was excellent. And you certainly showed your stuff during the storm — I mean, even if you did lose Levi. Even if you did fail to save the best damn navigator I've ever seen. Even if you totally screwed up and made us lose the person most essential to the operation of the Wonderblimp!"

"*Nike*—," Lucy said, a hard edge to her voice.

Nike glared at her, and she glared back, and I tried to sink down into my chair. He shook his head, his face went from mad to placid, and he continued. "As I was saying, you've done a wonderful job, and you have proven your value to the Wonderblimp. I — we — would like you to join us. We would like you to join the Order of the Atom."

"Why?" I asked. "For what?"

"*Why?*" Nike glared at me and shook his head, like he could not believe someone like me, a lowly reader, could possibly refuse such an honor.

Well, I wasn't going to refuse, but I knew there was a catch, and I wanted to know what it was.

"Yeah, why?" I asked.

"Why? Because—," he said. "Holmes, when you were a kid, didn't you ever want to be a pirate?"

"Was," I said, not really thinking. Vague memories came back to me of when I was young and had dressed up as a pirate: an eye patch, a scarf around my head, waving a wooden

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sword. "That is, I think so. When I was a kid. . . . There was some party I went to — there were these glowing orange heads, carved pumpkins, I think — and we got candy. I played pirate."

"But don't you want to be a *real* pirate? Scurvy-ridden, slimy, awful human beings who prowl the skies searching for treasure, wreaking mayhem, seizing power, righting wrongs, destroying governments, shoving it up the bungholes of the established order. . . . Didn't you ever want to be one of *those*?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so. . . . Every kid's dream, right?" I smiled. What the hell was he asking?

"Right," Nike said. "Every kid's dream. And that's what we are: nuclear pirates! Don't you want to be a nuclear pirate?"

"What's the catch, Nike?"

"The catch?" he asked. "The catch? Holmes, I am *shocked*."

"The catch, Nike."

"The catch?" Nike shook his head. "Holmes, there's really no catch. Honest."

"Honest?" I asked.

Nike smiled. "Tell him, Lucy."

"No catch," she said. "Just good, clean fun."

"See?" said Nike. "Would she lie to you?"

"I — I guess not," I said. But I still wasn't sure. Something didn't seem right. I wasn't really wild about what they did.

Hell, maybe they didn't really trade nukes. Maybe it was some wild con they were pulling on the Verts. Maybe they were crazy like most everyone else I'd ever met after the Zap. Maybe — like those silly diggers, the people who rutted around in the burned-out cities looking for old bottles — they just had to have something to search for. I looked at Lucy, and the more I looked at her, the less what the Nukers did seemed to matter.

"Christ," I said. "How the hell else am I going to get north? I'll join."

"Good," Nike said. "Wonderful." He turned to Bron and nodded. Bron handed Nike the small box. "You're probably wondering why we wear leather gloves," Nike said.

"The thought had crossed my mind," I said.

"Well, it's simple, really," Nike said. "Hands can get cut, calloused, particularly the palms. On the palms are little whorls, lines, imprints. It's very important to keep the pattern clear, you see."

"Uh, no, I don't see."

"O.K.," Nike said. "Let's say you had, oh, some device that read palm prints. Now, you'd want that palm print to be pretty clear so the device could keep reading it. So you'd wear a glove."

"Yeah, sure, that makes sense," I said. "But what's this 'little device' that reads the palm prints?"

"That," Nike said. "The knapsack nuke."

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I rubbed the palm of my left hand. "And?"

"Well, each nuke on board is coded to a certain palmprint. This nuke, for instance, belongs to me. If we wanted to fire this nuke, I'd have to put my palm on the side of the nuke, under the handle, as if I were pouring the 'thermos.' But that wouldn't be enough. Do you know about the football?"

"The code thing?" I guessed.

"Right," Nike said. "The football is the code that allows the nuke to be armed. And the football—"

"— is in someone's heart," I finished.

"Very good, Holmes. That's right. Now, these sort of secret agents of the U.S.A. military — we don't know who they were — well, they wandered around the U.S.A. before the Zap, and they put footballs in the hearts of people, like the firstborn child of a country sheriff or some official like that, but no one really knows who had the nukes or who the quarterbacks are. So the quarterback, the people carrying the footballs, could be dead. But now and then we find nukes, or we hear of people — like the Verts — who find nukes. We have to make new codes, new footballs, for them to work. Fortunately" — Nike smiled at Lucy — "Lucy knows how to do this."

"Swell," I said. "Just what the hell are you driving at?"

"Patience, patience," Nike said. He raised his hand and nodded at Bron and Doc North. They moved up behind me. "Now, this nuke is my nuke, but there's one teensy little problem with it." I squirmed around and felt Bron put his hand on my shoulder. "You see, we don't have a football for this nuke. It's a long story, but, well, Levi had the football. And Levi . . . you know what happened to Levi."

I rubbed the healing cut on my right hand. Oh yeah, I knew what happened to Levi. I could still hear his screams as he tumbled through the open hatch and down into the storm-tossed sea. "Levi died," I said.

"Yes," Nike said. "You let poor Levi die."

"His cable broke, damn it!" I screamed. "He fell out the hatch! I tried to save him — I *tried*."

"You didn't try hard enough, Holmes," Nike said. "And you will have to pay for your failure. You see, we need a new quarterback. Now, whom are we going to get to carry the football? I couldn't ask Lucy or Doc North to do it. The operation is a little tricky, and Doc couldn't do it on himself. Bron and Ruby have all carried the football before. Fair is fair, Holmes. You failed. Will you carry the new football?"

"Me!" I looked at Lucy; she had her head down, her braid partially hiding her face. "You said there wasn't a catch! Lucy, you said, 'No catch!'"

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"It's not a catch, Holmes," she whispered.

"Duty," Nike said. "Your sacred duty. Payment, if you will, for Levi's life."

"In my book, it's a catch," I said. I shook my head. "I won't do it, Nike. You can leave me here." I glared at Lucy. She. She got me into this. Suddenly she looked a little less attractive. I stood up. "I'll get my things," Bron laid his hand on my shoulder and gently but firmly pushed me back down in my chair.

"Holmes, Holmes, Holmes," Nike said. "I really think you should take the nuke." He pushed the thermos toward me. Bron took my left hand and shoved it toward the handle. "Please?"

"Go ahead," Lucy said. She smiled. "Doc's a good cutter. And I'll nurse you back to health." Her braid flicked around her neck.

"Do it," Bron said through his teeth.

"Ah, crap," I said, and grasped the nuke with my left hand. Did I have a choice? I didn't think so. My palm stung, the way it stings if you slap it against cold steel, and then I smelled the acrid smell of burning flesh. I pulled my hand back and stared at my numb palm. Fine gray powder dusted the surface.

"Good," said Nike. "Don't worry, your hand will heal. That's fried skin. Heating coils inside the nuke 'read' the pattern of your palm print. That's the new palm code. All we have to do is make a new football, put it in your heart, and the nuke's all yours."

Bron grasped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me to my feet. Lucy stood by my side and helped Bron take me back to the stern, back to the operating room, back to where I would go under Doc North's knife.

I'm not ashamed to admit it. Halfway there, I fainted. And when I came to, there was big long bandage on my chest and a throbbing in my thigh, and I hurt like hell.

A gray-haired woman hovered by my bed. She *seemed* to hover; I glanced down and could see no feet sticking out from her silver robe, and the hem of the robe fell short inches from the deck of sick bay. I stared at her face, an incongruous face. Though she had dry, silver-gray hair the texture of corn silk, no wrinkles ravaged her face. The shoulder-length hair framed a smooth face, a young face, a face that could be no more than thirty-three. Only fine wrinkles around her eyes matched the age of her hair.

"I have a message for you," she said.

I looked down at the bandage on my chest, a long strip of gauze taped vertically, from my navel up to almost my throat. A spot of brickk-red blood had dried in the center of the bandage. My chest felt like ants had crawled inside my lungs and peed formic acid.

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"How long?" I asked.

She shrugged and said, "Who knows the whence or why of messages?"

"No," I said. "How long have I been out?"

"Days, perhaps. It is not my knowing. To me a traveler delivered a message, saying, 'This is for Holmes on the Wonderblimp.' Are you Holmes?"

I nodded.

"Then this message is for you."

"Who *are* you?" I asked.

She smiled, a smile that showed clean, unyellowed teeth and deep pink gums. "Khim some call me, and Khim I am called," she said.

"You're a memor?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, a memor."

"But why not Ruby?"

Khim shrugged. "It was not for Ruby to deliver this message. To me falls this role."

"O.K.," I said. "What is it?"

Khim squinted her eyes, her face relaxed, and in a voice void of emotion, she said:

"From the Great Mountain
Big Mac offers you great riches
If you will seek him."

She opened her eyes.

"Who sends this message?" I asked. I'd never heard of someone known as "Big Mac," but the "Great Mountain" — that had to be Denali.

"I cannot say because they did not say," Khim said.

"Hmmm," I said. "Well, thanks for the message."

She smiled. "To thank is not difficult." Khim stood near me, not leaving.

I sighed. Ah, the code of the post-Zap world. Everything has its price. "You ask payment?"

"No payment is asked, but a service is," she said. "If you be a reader, then so read this."

She reached inside her robes and pulled out a leather covered volume. "Holy Bible," the words stamped in flaking gold leaf said on the cover. A *word* Bible. . . . "One chapter thus of the Book of Books."

"As you ask," I said. "But not now." I felt numbness creep under my lids. "I must sleep. . . ."

Khim nodded, and I saw the memor float out of the room, not even sure I had seen her at all. But I had the message. And I had no idea what it meant.

My body healed. Lucy pampered me, feeding me, changing my dressings, bathing my wounds. The cut in my chest seemed deep, but it was only a shallow groove, no more than a quarter inch. It closed from the inside out: first a great crevasse, then a valley, then only a thin ditch in my skin. In three weeks I had a long knot of scabs down the center of my chest, and the pain inside me had subsided to a small ache.

My thigh still throbbed, and when I got brave enough to look, I could see why. Someone had cut into the femoral artery, and a bruise up my

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leg showed where someone had stuck something inside the artery. What they had done I did not know, but it hurt like hell.

Lucy had moved me into my room and forced me to take walks three times a day on the promenade deck. In three weeks, Doc pronounced me fit enough "to see the town." I didn't feel like seeing the town, but Nike had other plans.

Nike, Bron, and Doc North were waiting for me in the lounge. Lucy helped me hobble up to the table and got me seated. My knapsack nuke was on the table, next to the battered thermos painted orange. The Verts' new nuke?

"You're looking lots better, Holmes," Nike said.

I scratched my chest. "Feels like you left your scalpel in here, Doc."

Doc smiled. "I counted them, You have only the football."

"What is the football, exactly?" I asked.

"A code," he said. "A brand, really. The nuke writes a code on a piece of copper. We put the copper at the tip of the tube, and through a hole in an artery in your thigh, feed the tube up into your heart. In one of the main heart arteries, a little balloon is pumped up, pressing the piece of copper against the artery wall. A slight electrical charge burns the design of the code into the artery wall, and then the tube and the brand are removed. So you see, your heart *is* the football."

"What do you do with the brand?"

"It falls apart when it's exposed to air for more than a minute," he said.

"So why'd you cut my chest open?"

"Had to double-check," he said. "Make sure the brand worked. You can see it on the outside of the artery. And the scar is like a sign, so people know you have the football."

"Sure," I said. It still felt like he'd left his scalpel in there. I pointed at the green thermos next to the orange thermos. "That a nuke, too?"

Nike nodded. "The Verts brought it in today. They delivered the fuel, too. Now it's our turn. But first" — he tapped the orange thermos — "the Verts get this nuke."

"O.K.," I said. Something was up, though. "When are you delivering it?"

"Today," Nike said. "You know time?"

"Yeah," I said. "Had a watch once, but the batteries went out."

"Well, we got you another watch." Nike handed me a big watch with a dial around the edges that turned. I squinted at the plate. The word "Rolex" was printed above the center of the dial. "It's a diver's watch," Nike said. "The watch winds, so it doesn't need batteries. You can twist the dial around so the arrow points to a particular time. When the hand hits the time, you know how long has passed."

"Pretty neat," I said. I slipped the watch on my wrist. It felt like a manacle, but smooth and cold.

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"You're kind of our timekeeper now," Nike said. "Take the nuke and squeeze the handle." He pushed the orange nuke across to me.

"Why?" I asked. "Didn't I squeeze this thing before?"

"Just squeeze the damn handle, Holmes," Nike said.

I looked up at Bron and saw him smile. Lucy stood next to me, her braid twitching. I'd taken the nuke before, the orange nuke. And now I was touching it again. But if I took it again, would something similarly nasty happen? On the other hand, maybe I could give up the nuke? Bron moved closer. I reached for the nuke.

"With your left hand, Holmes," Nike said. "Take your glove off and squeeze."

With my right hand I peeled the leather glove off my left hand. The palms looked the same, both soft and pink. Hell, I hadn't exactly been doing a lot of heavy labor lately. I took the nuke and squeezed.

The orange thermos burped, something went whir inside, and then I heard a faint clicking. I jerked my hand back and stared at the damn thing. "What's it doing?" I asked.

"It's on," Nike said. "The nuke is armed. It should go off in two hours."

I looked at the nuke, stared at it, and contemplated it exploding. My nuke: armed and ready to go. "But—," I said. "But how could that be? You haven't put a football in!"

Nike smiled. "But we did." He turned the nuke over and pulled a thin piece of copper out of the nuke. "See?" He crumpled the copper like tinfoil. "With the football removed, you can't turn the nuke off."

"Um, isn't that kind of a stupid idea?" I asked.

"Not if we want Myers to take the nuke," Lucy said. "There's only one way to stop it. See, we programmed it to disarm with Myers' palm print. Myers has to put his palm on the nuke. Only Myers' palm print will stop the bomb. In the meantime, this baby is yours."

I put my glove back on and pulled it over my left hand. Bron handed me a knapsack, and I put the orange nuke in it. Two hours, I set the watch for two hours. I had the nuke for two hours, or until Myers took the bomb. But there was just one tiny little nagging thought that bothered me.

What if Myers didn't take the bomb?

I went back to my cabin and sat there a while, comtemplating my nuke. It's not often a punk kid like me gets his own nuke, even if it's his for only a few hours, and I wanted to savor the privilege. Christ, I wanted to chuck that nuke into Kachemak Bay and start walking north. Why did they do this to me? I'd be rid of the nuke soon enough, but why did I have to hang on to the damn thing for two hours?

Some things occurred to me while

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I sat there watching the nuke, listening to it hum, watching it tick away. (There was a little plate on the handle, and if you pushed it back, you could see little numbers clicking their way down to 0000.) The first thing that occurred to me was why, if Nike could so blithely stick a coded slip into the nuke, they had stuck a football in me in the first place? The second thing, far more pressing, was how Myers was going to react when I told him — yes, *I* had to tell him — that he would have to cut the heart out of his kid (or whomever) in order to use his nuke. How was he going to react when I told him that in order to keep the nuke from going off, he'd have to *willingly* hand the kid over to Doc North and let the doc put a football in the kid's chest? These thing bothered me. A lot.

Lucy said it would be no sweat. "They *always* take the nuke, Holmes," she had said. "No one wants to get fried." That made nice sense, but what if Myers got, well, perverse? What if he didn't give a damn? What if he thought it was all a joke? It was my nuke, and I'd be there explaining it to him, and if he balked. . . .

I took my copy of the *I Ching* out and threw the coins. Once I had my hexagram built, I looked it up and readw what the Oracle had to say. For me, the *I Ching* came back with — ooh, the mother — Kuan, Contemplation (View), which said this:

Contemplation. The ablution had been made;
But not yet the offering.
Full of trust they look up to him.

Well, I sure as hell hoped so. But the image the *I Ching* gave me was not as reassuring. It said:

The wind blows over the earth:
The image of contemplation.
Thus the kings of old visited the regions of the worlds,
Contemplated the people,
And gave them instruction.

I had two changing lines I had to pay attention to, a six in the third place that said:

Contemplation of my life
Decides the choice
Between advance and retreat.

And a nine in the last place that said:

Contemplation of my life.
The superior man is without blame.

Now, with those changing lines in there, I had a whole new hexagram to consider, one that would give further advice. And this new one was a doozy — my old pal Chien, Obstruction. I'd seen that one before. It was like Number One on my all-time hit parade of Hexagrams Most Often Thrown. Every damn thing in my life was an obstruction, if I believed the *I Ching*.

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Chien told me that, yes, there was a little obstruction in my path — Mr. Nuke there purring away on my bed — but, no, not to worry, such things were good for the "superior man," because "an obstruction that lasts only for a time is useful for self-development." The *Ching* advised one "to join forces with friends of like mind and put himself under the leadership of a man equal to the situation." Well, O.K.: I had to trust that I was going to come out of this alive.

Maybe that's what the *Ching* is good for: confirmation of one's own best hopes. I closed the cover of the *Ching*, put the coins back in the pouch I wore around my neck, and said a brief prayer of thanks to the Oracle. It seemed like forever had passed, and then Lucy knocked on the door.

"Time to go, Holmes," she said. "We don't want to be late, do we?"

We sure didn't.

Myers sent a sleigh out to get us — a Mercedes sleigh, (I recognized the hood ornament): a Mercedes car body with wheels removed and steel runners bolted to the axle. Two big horses — the driver called them Belgians — pulled the sleigh. The driver was dressed in the height of Vert liveryperson fashion, I guess: green tights and a green velvet cape, with a big floppy hat. Lucy and I got in the backseat; I gingerly set my knapsack, with the nuke, on the floor.

We clip-clopped down the streets of Kachemak, past the airfield, and onto the Spit. The houses got scungier the farther down the Spit we went, until the Vert dwelling units ceased to become houses and were more accurately called hovels. Lots of hovels. Our driver explained that we were in Spit Rat territory, the Spit Rats being sort of a splinter group of the Verts, "like they take the whole back-to-the-earth thing too seriously," she said. She pointed out the window at a group of Spit Rat children, their clothes in rags and their faces smeared with dirt.

"Back to earth does not mean groveling in it," the driver added.

Snow on the Spit road had melted, so that the track was only hard, frozen asphalt. On the beach the tide had washed the snow away, but left little icebergs in its wake. The roofs of the various shacks along the Spit were covered with snow — big, long icicles melting down the edges so they almost met the ground. We went down the Spit to the end, then stopped at a small cluster of silver-gray log buildings, low to the ground, except for an octagonal lighthouse in the midst of them. The liveryperson got out and opened our door for us.

"The Spittoon," she said.

I slung the knapsack over my shoulder and walked in. A bartender was wiping the top of a long bar, but there wasn't a soul in the place. I glanced at my watch: 4:45. The nuke

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would go at 5:15. Myers had better get here soon. Lucy and I walked over to a big room beyond the bar. The bartender followed us in, the right side of her body twitching every now and then, and we ordered beers. I put my knapsack on a long wooden table, took out the nuke, and gingerly set it down. The bartender came over a few minutes later with two steins of dark, frothy beer and, shaking, set them down on the rough table, the foam slopping over the edge.

"A shaker," Lucy whispered when the bartender had gone. I nodded. One of the side effects of the Zap — some folks got this palsy that made them twitch all the time.

I looked at my watch again: 4:55. "Where's Myers?" I asked.

"He'll be here," Lucy said, but the way she bit her lip didn't convince me.

The ceiling of the Spittoon hung low, almost to the top of my head. Flags had been draped on the ceiling, as had hats, bras, dirty jeans, and other stuff I couldn't quite identify in the dim light. There was a big red flag with gold stars in the pattern of a dipper tacked on the wall — the PRAK flag. "Eight stars of gold on a field of red," I rememberd Captain Orca singing when we first came into Kodiak and saw the red flag flying over the town.

The door swung open and banged against the wall of the Spittoon, and in stepped a small army of Verts, Myers at the lead. He wore a big green coat with fancy epaulets on the shoulders and a great sword slung from his belt. The Verts flowed in behind him: men, women, and a few children, all in . . . in, well, the wonderful clothes that only Verts could wear: green, pinks, rainbow outfits, like they had been covered with honey and rolled through a warehouse of costumes. Whatever stuck to them they wore.

Myers came up to our table and looked down at the thermos bottle silently humming away. He looked over my shoulder, under the table, then down at the floor.

"Well, where is it?" he asked.

"Where's what?"

"The nuke? You bring the nuke?"

I tapped the thermos.

"That's *it*?" he asked. I nodded. "That was the nuke on the blimp. That's it? That little ol' thing?"

I shrugged. "You've seen nukes before. You gave us one just like this."

"Only it don't work," Myers said. "I kinda thought when you got them working again, you might gussy 'em up. You know, make 'em look like real bombs."

"They're not supposed to look like real bombs," Lucy said. "That's the idea."

"Well, O.K.," he said. "As long as it works."

I smiled again. "Oh, this baby works, all right. This baby works."

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The Verts crowded into the room and pulled up chairs. The bartender brought over a couple of pitchers of beer, and they settled down into a party. I didn't feel so joyous, but I had to try to see it their way. This was a big deal. They were getting a nuke.

"Let's get started," I said. Lucy had coached me on the whole procedure: start quickly and cut the crap, she'd advised. Time was of the essence. No shit. I looked at my watch again. Five o'clock. Time to book.

"Before I hand over this working nuclear device," I said, "there remains one issue we have to settle. Do you have the hostage?"

Myers put his arm around one of the kids: a small boy, cute as a button, with big blue eyes, light green hair, dressed in paisley knickers and a big purple sweater. "My son, John Deere," he said. "But how does this hostage deal work?"

I sighed. This was the tough part. "You know how the bomb is armed?"

"Press a button, right?" Myers looked back at his friends. "Then, KA-BOOM!"

"Sort of," I said. "But think about it. You wouldn't want just anyone blowing off a nuke, right? I mean, suppose someone got drunk. They might make a mistake."

Myers nodded. "Yeah. I mean, I'm head of the Verts. I should be the only one doing any nuking, right?" The Verts nodded.

"You got it. So we have this, like, code thing, the football." I pulled a piece of copper, about an inch long, half an inch wide from a pocket in the knapsack. "And see, if you want to fire the nuke, you have to slip the football in this slot" — I slipped it in a small crack on the bottom of the nuke — "and it starts the sequence."

"Hey," said Myers. "Did you just arm it?"

"No, no," I said. "I just had the nuke punch a new code. See, this is your football. We can't use our football on the nuke now. But if I wanted to arm it, I'd just slip the football back in."

"Uh, don't do that," Myers said.

"Oh, I won't. See, now you have this football. And you want to keep it safe. Like, we have our footballs for the nukes we have on the Wonderblimp, and we keep 'em someplace really safe. Lucy here has the football for this nuke," I lied. "Where do you suppose she keeps it?"

Myers grinned. "Up her pussy?" The Verts burst out laughing.

I waited for them to quiet, then said, "Not exactly." I walked over to Lucy and stared unbuttoning her jumpsuit. "Excuse me, Lucy," Some Verts started giggling. I unbuttoned her suit until her cleavage and that nice white scar were showing. Lucy tried to look dignified. I stroked my finger down that scar. "Lucy keeps her football in here," I said.

"But . . . but how do you get it out?" Myers said. His forehead was

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starting to sweat. The Verts got real quiet.

I slipped my knife from its sheath and threw it point down into the wood. It made a nick ***thunk*** sound, then quivered for a few seconds. The Verts didn't utter a peep.

"With that," I said.

"You . . . you cut her open?" Myers asked. His cheeks trembled a little.

"We cut out her heart," I said. "The football is ***in*** her heart. See, the piece of copper is snaked up through her arteries inside her heart, and the design — the code — is branded on one of the arteries. If you need to fire the nuke, you need two codes: your palm print on the handle, and the football. You cut out the heart, remove the branded artery, flatten it, and let it dry. But don't let it dry too much — it has to be fresh, and if you don't insert in within a day, the code's no good. When you've prepared the football, you slip it in this slot here on the nuke." I pointed to the slot at the base of the thermos. "The nuke 'rereads' the code on the artery, and it's armed."

"But. . . ," Myers said. "But if you cut her heart out, that would kill her."

"Probably," I said. "That's the idea."

Myers wiped a big green bandana across his forehead. "So, in order to arm the nuke," he said, "I'd have to cut out someone's heart to get the football?"

"John Deere's heart," I said. "We'll put the football inside John Deere." John Deere was holding on to his father, biting his lip. "It won't hurt him. Doc North's a good cutter. The doc will make a little ceremonial scar, like Lucy." Like me, I thought.

"Christ," he said. "So let me get this straight: in order to use that nuke, I'd have to kill my own son?" I nodded. "But — I could never do that."

I nodded again. "That's the way we figure it. You still want the nuke?"

Myers bit his lip. "I — I don't know. We'll have to think about it."

I looked at my watch. "Don't take too long. This bomb is going to blow in about five minutes."

"What?!!" Myers jumped up and put his hands on the table in front of me. "It's going to ***what***?"

"Blow," I said. "Like you said: KA-BOOM. I lied. It really is armed. It's been armed for about two hours. I can't stop it. If you want the nuke, and if you don't want it to blow, you have to put your hand on the handle. It's coded to stop at your palmprint."

"You —" Myers stopped. I knew what he was thinking. "On the blimp, three weeks ago. I touched the nuke?"

I shrugged. I remembered Myers holding the nuke. Lucy said they always wanted to touch the nuke. "We kind of knew you would," I said.

"Shit." He looked around at the Verts. A lot of them were nodding their heads. "Goddamn you," he said.

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Myers put his hand around the nuke. There was that flash, and then he jerked his hand back, gray powder falling from it. The thermos quit ticking. I sighed.

"O.K., she's all yours. There are a few other things we have to go over about its operation, but I can brief you later." I held up the piece of copper I'd put in earlier, rubbed it between my fingers, and it fell apart into green ash. "We have to make a new football, but we'll do that when we get John Deere on the table. The football tarnishes and falls apart a minute after it's exposed to air." I put the nuke inside the knapsack and handed it to Myers.

"John Deere?" Lucy said.

John Deere looked up at his father. "Dad?"

"It's O.K., Son." He gently pushed John Deere toward us.

Lucy put an arm around John Deere. "You like to play football?" she asked him.

"Yeah!" he said.

"Well, you're going to be a quarterback," she said. "We'll give you a jersey and everything."

"Neat!" John Deere said.

We walked to the door. Myers and the Verts sat, slumped, real quiet. They thought it was going to be a party. I could have told them otherwise. Nukes are never a party.

"Hey Lucy," Myers said.

We stopped and turned around. "Yeah?" Lucy asked.

"You guys are cruel bastards."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "Some of us are cruel bitches. You don't like it? So nuke us."

I opened the door and we left the Spittoon. The Verts had gotten their nuke, all right.

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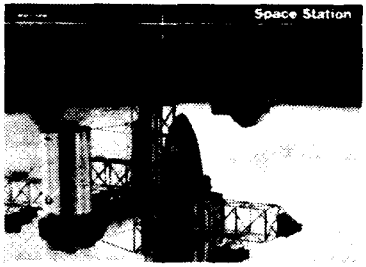

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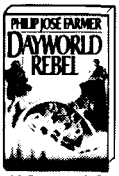

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